

## Article

# E-Learning Canvases: Navigating the Confluence of Online Arts Education and Sustainable Pedagogies in Teacher Education

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**Abstract:** Recent education policy debates in Europe focus on adapting European education systems to modern societal needs, emphasizing competency-based education to cultivate personal fulfillment, employability, active citizenship, social cohesion, and lifelong learning. Notably, digital and sustainability competencies are regarded as pivotal for building sustainable societies. Within this context, arts education assumes significance because of its experiential nature, engaging learners not only intellectually but also emotionally and ethically. This article explores how teacher educators can provide quality arts education that embraces sustainable pedagogies through digital technologies. It delves into teacher educators' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities presented by digital technologies when teaching arts courses online. Conducted as part of the European-funded project 'Critical Arts Education for Sustainable Societies,' this study involved interviews with 25 academics from five European countries. Key challenges identified include converting course content for online delivery, ensuring access to high-quality resources, or maintaining students' active involvement in the online learning process. Conversely, educators adapted arts education by revising teaching methods through digital technologies and developing new materials to promote inclusivity, engagement, participation, and action. Implications offer guidance to arts educators on how to reconfigure their role when delivering arts courses online.



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**Keywords:** arts education; sustainable pedagogies; higher education institutions; teacher education; online learning; distance learning pedagogy; education through the arts

## 1. Introduction: Bridging Arts and Real-Life Issues in the 21st Century

Education has a great responsibility to support future generations to respond to the challenges of today and the future. However, we need to wonder what kind of education this should be and whether teachers today embrace shifts in teaching for the future. Orr [1] notes that while education is vital for individual social engagement and shaping a better future, it can also be a part of the problem. A significant amount of formal and informal learning may not contribute positively to a sustainable future and could potentially hinder it [2]. Education for sustainable development (ESD) faces limitations due to existing policies and practices, with leadership failing to translate high-level commitments into meaningful action [3,4]. Education, paradoxically, can perpetuate unsustainable practices and old habits [5]. Schumacher (1997, in Sterling [2]) pointed out this paradox in 1974, emphasizing the need for a different kind of education—one that delves deep into our understanding of things and takes us from thinking into action and hopefully action that can bring change for a better future [6]. So, what are the possible ways forward? Echoing Schumacher's arguments (1997, in Sterling [2]), many authors argue for a kind of education that focuses on reflexivity as a means to a sustainable process of change [4]. Reflexivity can make individuals 'think critically about why we think what we do—and then to think and act differently' [4] (p. 469).

In this article, we argue that arts education (visual arts, music, theatre/drama, and dance) can be an education that promotes a different kind of education, one that invites learners to widen their horizon of what is thought possible, to imagine hopeful possibilities, and to act upon their thoughts and experiences through arts creation. While arts education has the potential to incorporate sustainable pedagogies to bring change, it is not guaranteed, and the extent to which it does so can vary, given the pedagogical framework set by the teachers. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to understand how teacher educators can open access to quality arts education that embraces sustainable pedagogies through digital technologies. The focus is on teacher educators (higher education instructors) because they provide teacher training across educational tiers spanning from kindergarten to tertiary levels and thus have the potential to start a snowball effect influencing not only student teachers but also their future students. Higher teacher educators are also researchers, actively participating in the generation of knowledge, development of pedagogical strategies, and the formulation of teaching standards, frameworks, and curricula applicable to diverse educational stages. Beyond the mere impartation of teacher training across educational strata, they are tasked with fostering innovation in their instructional methods, introducing novel approaches such as digital pedagogies [7,8]. In fact, the research study presented in this article stems from a European-funded project titled ‘Critical ARTs Education for Sustainable Societies’ [9]. It includes semi-structured interviews with 25 academics from five different European universities in Spain, Cyprus, Malta, Greece, and Poland that were part of the project consortium. The aim was to research arts educators’ experiences and perceptions to answer two main research questions:

- What are their overall attitudes towards online or blended learning-teaching?
- What are the main challenges and opportunities that they identify?

To frame this study, the following section (literature review) offers context relating to the synergies between arts education, ESD, and online education, which also has the potential to embrace sustainable pedagogies. Section 3 includes a detailed presentation of the research methodology. The Section 4 presents the results, which entail (1) the overall attitudes towards online and blended learning from the art teachers interviewed for this study, (2) the limitations of online learning in terms of the experiential and multisensory nature of arts education, the necessary technical condition, and the challenge of maintaining students’ engagement and motivation without physical presence, and (3) opportunities for reaching diverse students, discovering more engaging pedagogical practices, and supporting more participatory and self-managed learning spaces. The Section 5 deliberates on the future prospects of sustainable online arts education courses. The Section 6 presents the next actions of the CARE/SS project based on the results of this study that aim to respond to educators’ needs to organize and offer high-quality online arts courses.

## 2. Literature Review

The article aims to highlight the synergies between arts education and ESD and between enhanced ESD-arts education and online education, as these synergies have the potential to support sustainable pedagogies. Figure 1 presents a graphic summary of the key points highlighted in the literature review. It demonstrates the potential of delivering a reflective education for sustainable change, one that can take learners from thought to action through the synergies of three components: arts education, education for sustainable development, and online education. At the same time, it illustrates the need for Higher Education Institutions to take action to support these synergies and lists a series of three steps. The current article aims to address the first step.



Figure 1. The theoretical framework of the article.

### 2.1. What Are the Connections between Arts Education and Education for Sustainable Development?

Art education can play a crucial role in transforming struggling educational systems to meet the evolving needs of learners in a rapidly changing world marked by technological advances and persistent social and cultural injustices [10]. It can provide a different kind of education, promoting reflective learning and ‘taking’ future citizens beyond merely thinking into action. This also means offering learners opportunities to reflect on their identities and daily routines, to transcend boundaries, and to imagine alternative futures [6]. Arts education’s potential lies in its ability to embrace learning with, in, and through the arts [11]. The quest is to see the learner in the art classroom not as an autonomous, self-focused, and neutral artist [12] nor to restrict arts teaching to technical skills [13] but focus on learners’ relationship with the world they care about and use art as a vehicle to identify and address real-life issues [14,15]. Movements such as the socially engaged arts, community-based arts, participatory arts, dialogic arts, relational aesthetics, multicultural arts education (e.g., [16–21]), and many others focus on human interactions and their social context rather than viewing arts as an independent and private symbolic space.

The Seoul Agenda, adopted by the World Alliance for Arts Education [10], highlights that arts education needs to adopt pedagogies that (a) emphasize the importance of educating learners about sustainability-related topics and fostering a sense of environmental and social responsibility and (b) pedagogies that are designed to be environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. In this article, we will refer to the former as sustainability pedagogies because of the focus on sustainability issues and to the latter as sustainable

pedagogies because of the focus on the pedagogies themselves. Sustainable pedagogies, then, include methods and practices employed in education that aim at minimizing negative impacts on the environment and promoting social equity and inclusion. At the same time, we need to emphasize that there are no clear-cut boundaries between the two terms and that they can overlap very often. For example, the development of key competencies in arts education, such as criticality, action, creativity, transdisciplinarity, values, empathy, attentiveness, participation, futures, systems, decisiveness, and responsibility, could be considered sustainable pedagogies when the focus is on the pedagogy. However, when these competencies are developed within the study of sustainability issues, then they can also be considered as sustainability pedagogies [22].

The WAAE hosted a Global Arts Education Conference in March 2023 to discuss the new Framework for Culture and Arts Education. The need for sustainability and sustainable practices was re-affirmed as arts education continuous to be considered “a fundamental and sustainable component of a high-quality education reform” [10] (p. 3), and its methodologies, principles, and practices can “contribute to resolving social and cultural challenges today’s world is facing” [10] (p. 10). There was also a common understanding [23] that the new framework endorses the UNESCO Goals for Sustainable Development [24] and the UNESCO Futures of Education [25]. Nevertheless, the WAAE [23] noted that for the Framework to have meaning, it should specify and distribute examples of implementations, especially in a post-COVID-19 pandemic context where increased global tensions emerge with unpredictable environmental, economic, cultural, and social effects.

One way forward to promote sustainable and sustainability pedagogies in arts education is to endorse online/digital education. The coronavirus crisis gave rise to a new digital educational stage where universities started consolidating digital pedagogies for mainstream degrees while rethinking and expanding continuing education and professional development provisions [26]. The following section discusses the opportunities and challenges specifically for online arts education and how the experience gained because of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a better understanding of digital education. As the WAAE [23] stresses, there is a need to identify and respond to arts educators’ current and future needs and challenges to maximize the full potential of arts education contribution to building sustainable societies.

## 2.2. Online Arts Education

One of the challenges that came into focus because of the COVID-19 pandemic was the quality of arts education delivery in an online environment because of the general recognition of arts education’s role in children’s well-being. Thus, experiences exchanged amongst academics did not focus on the distance learning mode as such but on fostering creative expression during that challenging period, especially in empowering students, enhancing resilience, promoting well-being, fostering community development, and sustaining interpersonal connections [27,28]. During the post-COVID-19 period, attention moved away from the need to respond to an emergency situation and turned to the affordances of the online mode of delivery as there was a growing realization of the possibilities that online learning might bring in arts education.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research on online arts learning in HEIs for preservice teachers was limited, with a few noteworthy examples highlighting effective practices within this unique context [29,30]. Some countries have a strong regulatory framework at a policy level that restricts the delivery of online degrees, especially for undergraduate studies [31]. Alter [30] in Australia emphasized that preservice generalist teachers might lack a specific interest in arts, challenging educators to foster engagement in a distance learning (DL) environment. This sentiment aligned with previous findings that reveal a lack of confidence in art skills among preservice generalist teachers [32]. Alter’s [30] study also revealed concerns among participants regarding real-time question-answering, in-the-moment idea exchange, and a sense of physical belonging that on-campus students seemed to enjoy. Cutcher and Cook [33], also in Australia, echoed these concerns in a study

on creative arts education, emphasizing the importance of interaction and the need for redefined roles for educators in the online environment. Quinn's [29] study in the USA compared traditional and online approaches for early childhood education undergraduates, indicating that collaborative online art experiences allowed for more autonomy and playfulness. However, this study highlighted the crucial role of teacher presence in providing clear instructions for technology use and setting parameters for thematic exploration.

The integration of new technologies in arts classes for initial teacher training is extensively explored, but limited attention is given to online arts learning in undergraduate arts courses [31]. Some arts educators resist online learning, perceiving a dissonance between the experiential nature of arts education and eLearning [34]. Research [34,35] reveals concerns among teacher educators about the challenges and compromises of distance learning in arts education.

Ijdens' report [36] on arts education experts' views (in Europe and Latin America) on digitalization emphasizes the need for fundamentally new approaches, with differing opinions on whether digitalization affects arts education goals. While digitalization is expected to impact the content of arts teaching more than general teaching processes, it is seen to have a moderate beneficial impact on arts learning, particularly in motivating learners and fostering various skills. Furthermore, digitalization is viewed as more beneficial for media arts education compared to visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and creative writing. Access for different groups, especially young and physically disabled individuals, is noted as a potential benefit.

Overall, these studies conclude that online arts learning for preservice teachers requires careful consideration of the challenges and opportunities presented by digitalization, emphasizing the importance of teacher presence and interaction and reimagining arts education for the online learner.

Despite the challenges noted during the Emergency Remote Teaching, the OECD [31] predicted that there would be a higher demand among students and prospective students for more flexible study options, including digital learning. Leveraging distance learning technologies in universities offers significant potential for expanding access to high-quality arts education to both conventional and non-traditional learners [7]. Online learning can, therefore, be designed to be inclusive, making arts education more accessible to a wider range of students, including those who may have physical disabilities or other limitations that make traditional education less accessible. Inclusivity can be seen as a sustainable and equitable approach to education. However, this endeavor necessitates Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to reevaluate their strategies for establishing a cutting-edge learning environment. This entails the implementation of explicit policy guidelines and educational frameworks designed to engage teacher educators effectively. Moreover, it requires dedicating ample time and resources to understand arts educators' needs and facilitate their teaching and assessment methodologies to reach their intended goals. Digital learning resources, such as e-books, videos, and interactive simulations, can be updated easily, reducing the need for printing, which is more sustainable. Arts teacher educators must also redefine and reconfigure their roles in designing and delivering arts courses within an online learning environment [7].

Post-COVID-19 pieces of research highlight both the challenges and opportunities of online arts teaching–learning and affirm important elements for successful online learning, such as the importance of social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence for developing meaningful learning communities [37–39]. These issues draw on the content and methodology of arts education courses, which have the potential to focus on educating through socially engaged arts and thus endorse sustainability and sustainable pedagogies.

The International organization OECD, as well as the European Union, were very surprised to note—when assessing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in general, and not specifically in the different disciplines [31,40]—that universities in most countries worldwide were poorly prepared for a rapid shift to online teaching. HEIs might have quickly switched from face-to-face to online classes, but they “often struggled with

insufficient experience and time for conceiving new instructional delivery and assignment formats” [31] (p. 3).

### 2.3. What Is the Next Step?

In Europe, where this current research study is located, a policy is in place to foster innovative pedagogies and connect them with policy recommendations. Specifically, the Erasmus+ Program [41], which spans the 2021–2027 period and encompasses education, training, youth, and sport, acknowledges the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in ensuring educational access while supporting equal opportunities for all. The COVID-19 crisis underscored the critical role of digital education in Europe’s necessary digital transformation, emphasizing the growing need to harness the potential of digital technologies for teaching and learning and to cultivate digital skills for everyone [39]. As part of the digital education action plan, the European Union has established a European Digital Education Hub, which is an open online collaborative community for digital education stakeholders in Europe and beyond [42]. Within this community, a working group on digital education and sustainability is expected to provide further support to educators at all different levels of education in March 2024. Further, the Erasmus+ Program aims to assist learners, educators, and institutions in their journey toward digital transformation, with a focus on building capacity and fostering a deep understanding in all types of educational and training organizations on how to leverage digital technologies for teaching and learning across all levels and sectors, as well as the development of digital transformation plans [41].

One of the initiatives that received funding under the Erasmus+ Program, specifically Key Action 2 for partnerships among Higher Education Institutions and organizations, is the “Critical ARts Education for Sustainable Societies” (CARE/SS) project (2022–2024) [9]. CARE/SS is a European-funded project, and as such, it focuses on arts education offered in European countries and, in particular, in the countries of the consortium partners. The CARE/SS project is geared toward arts education and aims to contribute additional research evidence to establish a pedagogical framework for distance and blended learning courses, particularly in arts education for generalist teachers (undergraduate/postgraduate students, preservice/in-service elementary school teachers). CARE/SS is focused on broadening access to the arts through online and blended learning, enhancing arts education with elements related to education for sustainable development. This approach promotes creative thinking, critical and systemic thinking, reflection, and the development of skills, attitudes, and values through socially engaged arts. The project’s overarching goal is to facilitate the digital transformation of higher education institutions and to aid in developing and delivering teacher training programs designed to empower school teachers in the field of arts education, thereby strengthening their teaching profile. As a first step, this project aims to identify the needs (challenges) of teacher educators (academics) in teaching their courses online or blended and, in particular, to understand how teacher educators can open access to quality arts education that embraces sustainable pedagogies through digital technologies (opportunities). This article documents the first step of the CARE/SS project.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This study followed a qualitative research approach in which semi-structured interviews were the means for documenting academics’ views, perceptions, and experiences.

### 3.1. Sample

For this study, each team of the CARE/SS project had to identify academics from Higher Education Institutions from each country involved. A purposive sampling technique was followed, which included the following criteria for selection: (a) the academics had to belong to different arts disciplines to identify a variety of needs and demands related to distance arts education, and (b) they needed to have had experiences in online/blended teaching.

Twenty-five academics voluntarily participated in the interviews. Aged from 32 to 65, seventeen of them were women, and eight men. In addition, four were from Cyprus, five were from Spain, five were from Malta, six were from Poland, and five were from Greece. Their academic disciplines were visual arts education (five participants), dance education (four participants), drama/theater education (five participants), literature education (two participants), and the creative arts (interdisciplinary approach; two participants). Nine interviewees had experiences in distance or blended learning before the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Emergency Remote Teaching mode adopted by all universities during the lockdowns, all the academics taught their disciplines by distance.

### 3.2. Research Tools

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed to gain insight into academics' views, perceptions, and experiences. This was based on interview questions used in past research projects [34,35,43] and the purpose of the specific project. The interview schedule consisted of ten open-ended questions covering five broad areas (see Appendix A):

- (a) Interviewee's overall views and attitudes towards distance learning and/or blended learning,
- (b) Interviewee's key challenges faced for designing and implementing online learning-teaching in his/her discipline,
- (c) Interviewee's key opportunities encountered/ utilized for designing and implementing online learning-teaching in his/her discipline,
- (d) Interviewee's views and experiences regarding different forms of interaction and presence in an online environment, emphasizing the instructor-student interaction, the student-student interaction, and the student-content interaction, and
- (e) Interviewee's overall reflections on their experiences.

There were no direct questions about sustainability and sustainable pedagogies to allow space for the interviewees to give rise to multiple possible topics and the complexity of online learning instead of imposing a focus that was too close on any particular issues. However, it was expected that aspects of sustainability and sustainable pedagogies would be brought up because of the experiential nature of arts education and the importance of 'learning together' in an arts classroom.

To ensure that the necessary information was obtained, the interview schedule included a checklist for the interviewer to use in case an issue was not brought up as expected when a question was asked (see Appendix B).

### 3.3. Data Collection

After the ethics approval was obtained by the ethics committee of the coordinator's University, all partners proceeded to arrange and carry out the interviews. The academics were interviewed individually, with a length ranging from 45 to 90 min. The interviews were audio-taped.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Initially, the interviews were transcribed and anonymized using country origin codes (CY for Cyprus, GR for Greece, MT for Malta, PL for Poland, and ES for Spain), followed by numbers that indicated the order in which the interviews took place.

The data analysis was founded on an inductive approach based on a constant comparative method of data analysis [44]. A template containing main categories for analyzing data was used for the first level of analysis to allow easy comparison between the results obtained by each partner. The categories of the template referred to the views and attitudes towards online learning, the key challenges and opportunities when designing online courses, the interactions between teachers, students, and contents, and the interviewees' reflections on needs, success stories, and the quality of assessment. Following this sequence, each partner highlighted excerpts from the interviewees' responses, identifying first the

core ideas linked to them and noting afterward the meeting points and differences among participants. Finally, the data from the five countries was related and compared after quantifying the participants' demographics (gender and age), artistic disciplines, types of distance learning experiences, and whether they had received or not received technical support when carrying out online teaching.

For this article, data related to the sustainability of online arts education are presented in the next section. We have selected and gathered insights and excerpts on sustainability from the interviewees' responses by focusing on the challenges-opportunities pairing. In so doing, we seek to show how both aspects are deeply intertwined in their teaching practices, noting that the participants' sustainability concerns about distance arts courses have usually given rise to the creation and use of new strategies, tools, and methods for improving students' conditions of learning.

#### 4. Results

In this section, we first give an account of the academics' mixed perspective towards online arts learning. Their attitudes were broadly positive but also often concerned about practical and technical limitations associated with the loss of physical presence. Next, we present the challenges that the interviewees had to face to ensure the sustainability of distance arts education, in the sense of making it really inclusive and promoting social participation among students. Finally, we focus on the new possibilities to which online learning opens the door: attending classes from diverse locations and populations, using innovative teaching methods, accessing materials multiple times, engaging in more experimental and autonomous tasks, etc. Again, such possibilities are methodologically tied to the development of sustainable pedagogies by fostering key competencies such as critical thinking, transdisciplinary learning, or collaborative problem-solving. Therefore, online learning was recognized by the interviewees as a chance to improve the sustainability of arts education if a number of challenges were conveniently addressed and overcome.

##### 4.1. Overall Attitudes towards Online and Blended Learning

The overall attitudes of the interviewees towards online learning in arts education usually combined several pedagogical concerns with the recognition of its flexibility in terms of scheduling and personalized learning experiences. In addition, the participants' prior experiences with online learning affected their stance on its possibilities. While nine interviewees had conducted online classes before 2020, the other sixteen had to carry them out during the COVID-19 lockdown for the first time. This difference often entailed expressing more openness or reticence towards the results and potentialities of distance arts education. During the pandemic, the quick shift from face-to-face to online teaching was described by several participants as a situation that forced upon them and sometimes made them go into panic mode. In any case, the interviewees' outlook on online or blended arts education was generally positive, pointing out that interactions, timings, teaching methods, and lesson plans could benefit from digital media and thus become more innovative and sustainable.

Blended learning was seen as the most sustainable modality for arts education since it allows teachers and students to deal with art practicalities in face-to-face sessions as well as tapping into e-learning flexibility. According to most arts teachers, it is respectful of students' multiple learning rhythms, also preserving activities that need to be in-person due to their embodied nature. As explained in Section 4.3, several interviewees from Greece and Spain perceived that students' online interaction with educational materials strengthened their engagement and partnership in the classroom. Further, face-to-face classes promoted a kind of bonding among participants that could be moved to online settings more easily. When interactions must be carried out exclusively online, however, many interviewees admitted difficulties that needed to be addressed through a variety of digital resources.

Concerning online teaching, the interviewees mostly thought of it as more demanding, in the sense that they should supply several practical limitations, but as finally giving them positive outcomes. Even during the pandemic outbreak, when most arts educators had to

implement an online methodology almost out of the blue, many came up with inventive ways of teaching art, considering the experience in terms of challenges instead of threats. Many, too, kept or took advantage of these innovations after returning to normal classes. Thus, one of the main findings of this study showed the participants' willingness to face challenges arising from online learning through varying digital adjustments, converting these challenges into new opportunities for sustainable pedagogies and giving rise to a series of methodological innovations (see Figure 2).

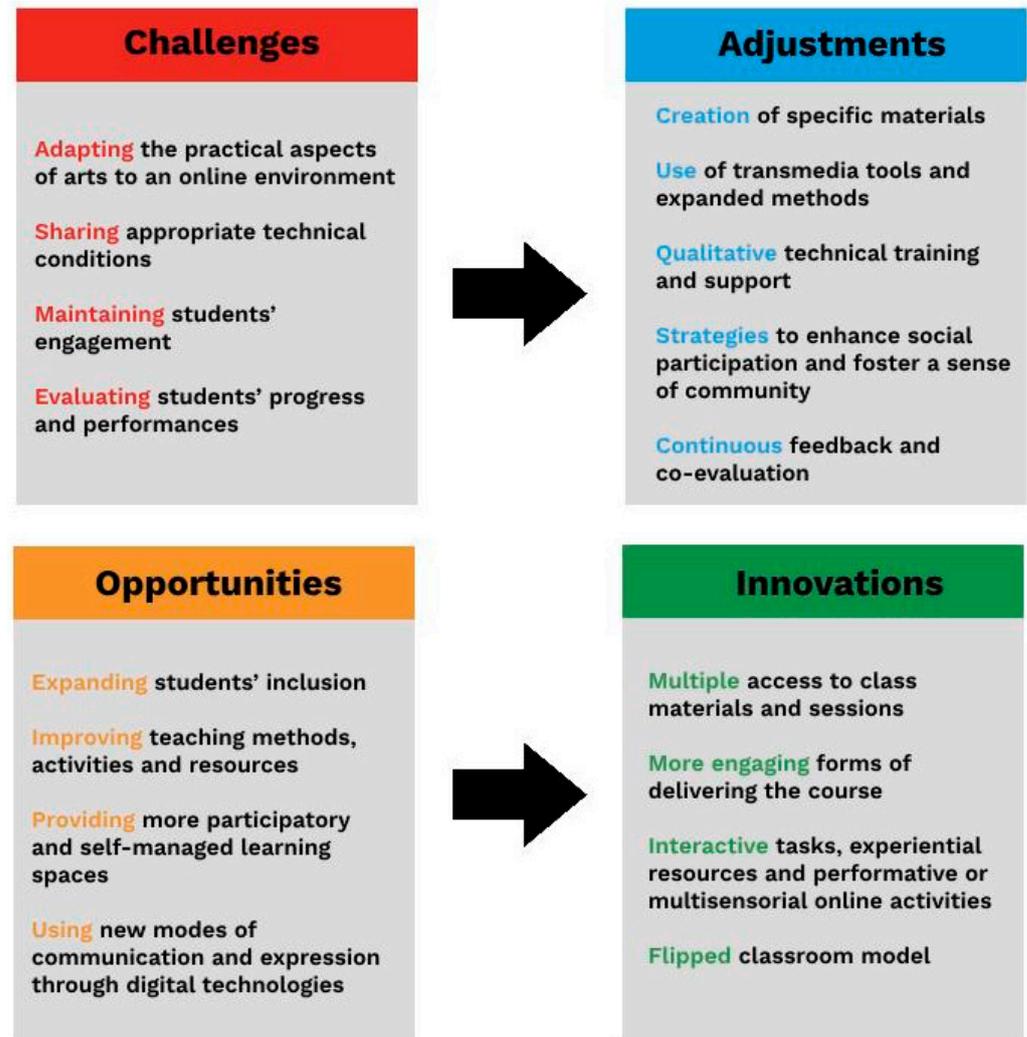


Figure 2. Challenges/adjustments and opportunities/innovations related to online arts education.

#### 4.2. How the Participants Faced the Limitations of Digital Learning

The teachers interviewed for the CARE/SS project showed certain consensus around the main challenges for making online arts education sustainable. Although their responses slightly changed depending on each country, university, and artistic discipline, most of the concerns expressed during the interviews were related to translating practical aspects of arts through digital media, dealing with technical issues in online environments, and maintaining engagement with and among students despite the lack of face-to-face interactions. Next, the three main challenges related to experiential learning, technical issues, and learner engagement are presented in detail.

(1) All the teachers acknowledged limitations in online learning to capture the experiential and multisensory nature of arts education. In this respect, some disciplines, such as music or performing arts, were said to be especially hard to shift to an online domain. As the dance lecturer MT1 pointed out, “[it] is all about the sensorial, the haptic, about giving

information in the body.” Thus, the loss of physical interaction makes it difficult to assist students in developing many practical skills. For instance, teaching musical instruments via computer can be awkward due to the inability to help with hand placement or the live combination of instruments and/or voices. “Music and movement are probably the most difficult disciplines to adapt to distance teaching because it is complicated to coordinate the sound and the image across; a time difference invariably arises,” GR1 explained. However, this barrier also works for other analogic techniques such as screen-printing, melting sculpture, or installation art. Overall, such limitations led teachers to understand that some content could not be moved directly to a digital learning environment but needed the creation of specific materials or the use of additional tools and expanded methods. According to ES1, with a long experience in e-learning before the pandemic, “It’s not only about teaching a technique [as such] but also about the line of thought involved in the use of that technique.” Consequently, she noted that rather than trying to reproduce artistic procedures accurately, distance arts teaching benefits from a transmedia, interdisciplinary perspective.

(2) The interviewees referred to appropriate technical conditions as crucial to being able to teach and learn arts online sustainably. As technical difficulties affect both the capacity to adjust artistic practices to online learning environments and the promotion of students’ interactions and engagement, they are also one of the main causes of concern for arts educators. Almost all the interviewees have had to face students’ failing internet connectivity and precarious devices and software. “In a class of twenty,” MT2 said, “you always find one or two people who don’t have access to a laptop or a reliable internet connection.” This lack sometimes added to inefficient platforms for online teaching or, on the contrary, to be drowned in tons of digital tools. Thus, the music instructor ES2 felt overwhelmed because of the number of resources offered to him during the hard lockdown: “We need time to assimilate the use of a tool. I will not be able to teach a proper lesson just because I have a bunch of resources. I’d rather be thoroughly instructed in a few of them, one at a time”. The need for technical training seems, therefore, as important as the very availability of software or computers. Regarding this, although all the interviewees received technical support from their institutions during the pandemic, some of them considered that it was insufficient.

(3) Maintaining students’ engagement and motivation without face-to-face interactions was another main concern for most arts educators. According to MT3, in online sessions, it can even be challenging “to read the mood of the class.” Talking in front of a computer and receiving little participation feels like being “a radio speaker,” ES3 said. On the other hand, students’ more common forms of resistance to exposure, such as not turning the camera on, showed that many learners oftentimes do not feel comfortable with having their private spaces made public on the internet. During the pandemic, many interviewees used several activities and resources (discussion forums, wikis, chat rooms, online quizzes, blogs, feedback tools, etc.) to keep students actively involved, addressing distractions and building up a sense of collaboration. Thus, for most educators, strategies and endeavors to enhance social participation and foster a learning community were and are still key to making online learning sustainable. This includes promoting not only discussion and feedback from students but also relationships among them. Overall, group actions following the rules of safe dissemination and public exposure “strengthen students’ contact and appetite for the subject since motivation is contagious,” GR2 pointed out. In this sense, the academic in Visual Communication CY1 suggested including a schedule with time just to meet: “You feel you’re doing something collectively.”

The interviewees shared other challenges encompassing and interrelating concerns about practical, technical, and engagement issues. First, they highlighted the lack of time for adapting to digital teaching, i.e., for adjusting teaching methods, curriculum delivery, and/or technological tools. Additionally, they mentioned difficulties in evaluating students’ progress and performances in an online setting. In fact, the limitations of digital technologies for viewing certain corporeal or practical works led many arts educators to incorporate alternative assessing methods, usually based on continuous feedback and co-

evaluation, giving students more room to participate in this process. Finally, MT1 and MT2 noted that interacting with disabled students during the pandemic was very complicated. For most of the interviewees, ensuring the inclusion and accessibility of students with special needs is still a pending matter of distance learning.

Despite all these concerns, however, no interviewee dismissed online learning as a sustainable modality for arts education. Moreover, they saw it as a way of approaching the courses more inventively, thereby improving their teaching methods and increasing the learning possibilities among participants. In the next subsection, we explain the main opportunities identified by the interviewees to design and implement online learning sustainably.

#### *4.3. New Learning Opportunities Associated with Digital Media and Online Environments*

Although many arts disciplines require a thorough translation into digital media, the interviewees did not find any insurmountable gap between them. Quite the opposite, most of the teachers considered that arts education is a field that can gain from media. They noticed that digital tools, mainly in blended courses, brought multiple opportunities to improve the processes of teaching and learning. Thoroughly presented in the following paragraphs, these opportunities are mostly associated with the way of delivering the course, the teaching toolkits (i.e., the set of methods, activities, and resources), and the very use of digital technologies.

(1) Many teachers from all five countries emphasized the fact of being capable of reaching numerous students (from several groups, locations, and degrees) within the same course and more easily than with traditional teaching. According to GR1, students' participation expands in online courses: "There are students with mobility difficulties or in a wheelchair, who in this way of teaching can participate normally." In addition, online learning can go beyond the typical operational time of the universities. For instance, the music lecturer MT3 referred to the opportunity of offering tutorials late in the evening or even at the weekends, while PL1 or GR2 highlighted that online learning offers multiple access to and much more time for analyzing the class materials. It, therefore, fosters social inclusion and equity among learners by making content more available and open to a broader audience. This, in the words of CY2, "makes the medium more democratic".

(2) The teachers noted that they needed to spend more time preparing online classes. During the pandemic, this necessity made them plan and rethink both the course contents and how they were going to conduct the units more carefully. Consequently, their toolkits for teaching arts benefited from more engaging forms of creating and showing presentations, introducing course elements, managing the group, leading the workshops, sharing new materials, and contacting students. This toolkit continued for those interviewees who returned to face-to-face education, leaving an improvement in their current teaching. As PL2 explained,

[During the pandemic] I learned many new tools and forms of teaching classes, and we all experimented. Now, I am even more open to new things and can pass the prepared materials to subsequent years. Undoubtedly, it was long hours of work, preparation for these classes, and materials, on the one hand creating, and on the other hand recording it, step by step. Sometimes, I devoted a few days to making these videos short and attractive for students. However, I still use these videos, you know, sometimes a student has an individual teaching mode or does not understand something and can always return to it.

(3) Deeply connected with the previous two points, the academics noted that the use of digital technologies could provide more participatory and self-managed learning spaces, such as virtual forums for discussing artistic projects and gathering students' reflections. In this sense, they highlighted that online platforms can become something alive and changing, allowing for new modes of communication and expression. For example, GR3 mentioned several new methods she incorporated during the pandemic: "Performative/multisensory storytelling, intonations, changes in stimuli, role reversals, frequent on-camera stage exercises, transforming the familiar into a stage space, etc.". In so

doing, “we all became better stage managers, animators, and performers,” she claimed. In her view, “utilizing any situation, technology, simple or more complex medium/material, is a component of a creative person and the main ingredient of artistic creation.” In addition, the development of interactive tasks and the creation of more experiential resources and activities turned out to be a way of stimulating problem-solving abilities. In this respect, many educators drew on the flipped classroom model: first, they shared learning content materials of the new lesson (videos, articles, tutorials. . .) in the digital course platform to be consulted asynchronously, and later on, during the teaching time, the students discussed or practiced these materials in small groups. Especially in blended learning, this method was intended to favor the participation of the whole class, improving the teamwork climate in the face-to-face sessions and also prompting learners to be explorative, engage with the content materials online, and develop autonomous thinking skills. “I would provide a broader spectrum of references where students can question or experiment with different ideas and then see what filters through,” MT4 explained. Moreover, the flipped model in blended learning helped academics to discern more easily the students who were going through difficulties and to offer them more personalized forms of support. As learners came prepared for face-to-face classes, the time for elaborating and sharing doubts was also larger, thereby enriching the interactions with and among students and contributing to a better understanding of the course.

Figure 3 uses the image of an artist’s palette as an illustrative metaphor to show the learning-teaching methodologies that were under scrutiny when the arts educators of this study taught their courses by utilizing online learning. These methodologies overlap, and educators aim to utilize a portion of them, and frequently not all of them, at any given activity to achieve their goals in their courses.



**Figure 3.** E-learning palette for online ESD-enhanced arts education.

## 5. Discussion

This article aims to trigger a discussion about the emerging implications of quality arts education that embraces sustainable pedagogies through digital technologies. Arts education that focuses on the reconstructive role that the arts can have in society, that views arts as a vehicle to identify and address pressing real-life issues, is, by definition,

endorsing sustainable pedagogies—i.e., a kind of pedagogies that seek to promote key competencies such as criticality, action, creativity, transdisciplinarity, values, empathy, attentiveness, participation, futures, systems, decisiveness, and responsibility. However, the conditions under which this can be successfully performed in a digital context are not fully discussed. Although research and the literature on online education are extensive and distance learning has aroused the interest of many scholars, the move of art disciplines to educational digital environments has not been comprehensively addressed yet as arts educators' needs have not been meticulously studied. This is the gap that the current study aims to address.

Sustainable pedagogies in arts education strongly resonate with the core principles of progressive education, mainly grounded on utility, interest, experience, and integration [38]. Dewey argued that education is itself a living and should connect students with a democratic society where they can participate in social change and innovation [45]. In progressive education, as well as in arts education, the focus is placed on learning by doing, encouraging participants to explore and discover concepts through hands-on activities and projects [46]. How these essential features can be present when training future teachers in Higher Education Institutions by distance or blended modes of delivery is a crucial question that needs to be answered.

According to data presented in the previous section, online arts education becomes sustainable when there is a learning community functioning during or between the classes, allowing teachers and students to participate in supportive interactions and meaningful pedagogical relationships. In fact, the core ideas and practices in arts disciplines such as dance or theatre are about co-existing, interacting, and being together in the same space. This means that the pedagogies at play while teaching them also need to be empathetic and community-based, thereby fostering competencies related to sustainable education. This result affirms the findings of other studies that highlight the importance of an inclusive online learning community [46] where iterative opportunities exist for learner-learners and tutor-learners interactions [33]. According to Cuther and Cook, there are 'curriculum areas that *require (emphasis added)* synchronous and rich discussion, correction and engagement, such as the arts' [33] (p. 15). As evidenced in the results, translating this feature into an online domain implies several challenges associated with the loss of physical interaction but also opens new possibilities and forms of participation through digital technology. Therefore, students' engagement in online arts learning is something to be achieved collectively and using specific methods that involve virtual media. Blended learning, in this regard, favors students' development of a personal learning process at home and a socialization of such learning in the classroom.

During the pandemic, many academics realized or confirmed that an impersonal way of attending classes, such as participating anonymously in a live virtual session without turning the camera on, does not really fit in with the kind of learning usually promoted in arts education. In other words, students in the arts are expected to interact, collaborate, and perform several tasks to be able to learn. This finding validates the underlying understanding among art educators that learning in, about, and through the arts is an emotional experience where experimentation, reflection, and dialogue are crucial elements, especially in an online environment [46].

On the other hand, arts subjects and practices are in tune with the framework of sustainable pedagogies in the sense of empowering learners to overcome difficult situations, fostering resilience, and providing forms of understanding and connecting with other people [47]. Filling these needs was key during the COVID-19 lockdown and still is to reimagine what the world can become after the pandemic. Thus, converting online arts education into a series of singular, situated, and participatory learning encounters makes it sustainable and feeds into the development of sustainable societies. Payne [46] highlights the feedback she received from her MA students when teaching her art course online that indicates 'the act of participation was more important (*to the students*) than how useful the critique was to their studies.'

The experiential component of arts is also in line with sustainable pedagogies because it gives rise to embodied, affective, and ethical processes of learning. Action through creation is an important sustainable competence for future teachers. Preserving such nature in an online domain turns out to be the main challenge for making online arts education both sustainable and aligned with sustainability-related values. However, this can only be achieved by avoiding the mimetic teaching of analog art disciplines, opting instead for transmedia adjustments and digital variations of many techniques. In this respect, online platforms can offer creative methods and manifold resources to maintain the experiential meaning of arts education. As explained by several teachers interviewed for the CARE/SS study, performative, multisensorial, and problem-solving strategies have room in online courses whether technology and digital mediums are properly employed. Their efforts were in line with other academics' [29,48] efforts in the USA context prior to the pandemic, who reported on how they moved an art atelier or some art activities in an online format by focusing on peer learning, weekly synchronous meetings and discussions on work-in-progress or finished artworks to offer emotional support and encouragement.

Assessment is often seen as another challenging aspect in the online delivery of arts education. However, it is also a good example, considering some data, of how difficulties are sometimes faced so that they finally give room to more inclusive teaching methods. Thus, the most successful experiences with digital assessing relied on turning a task that is normally completed at the end of the course into an ongoing, sustained process [46,48]. Setting interim assessments, giving almost immediate and more extensive feedback to students' works, or involving students otherwise during this process (through co-evaluation, peers' assessment, etc.) were all attempts to deal with a challenge arising from the lack of physical contact [34]. Finally, alternative assessment models also open the door to increasing students' engagement in and control over their learning [34].

In turn, opportunities for sustainability associated with online learning should not be taken for granted. Although the accessibility and inclusion of learners from different geographies and situations are assumed to be inherent advantages of this modality, most of the interviewees point out that the access of students to appropriate technology or a reliable internet connection is sometimes limited. In addition, in many online or hybrid courses, finding a proper way of interacting with disabled students or with students who have special needs is still a pending matter.

The arts educators of this study were not trained to integrate the possibilities of digital education (online or blended) as alternative pedagogies. This is a reality also noted almost two decades ago by Akins et al. [49] in the USA. It is puzzling that there has not been much research on art educators' (academics') needs since then. Probably, this can be explained by the fact that there was not a pressing necessity, something that the COVID-19 pandemic has overturned. HEIs need to acknowledge that it is not only students who feel that arts courses are unfamiliar and challenging to them when they first need to learn online [39] but also arts educators. Despite their unfamiliarity, and although the results present several challenges in their preparedness to adapt arts education to online education/learning, they have also shown resilience and the ability to turn these challenges into opportunities by reconfiguring their roles and methods, unlike other academics that felt that online learning was in dissonance with the arts disciplines [31]. By investing in digital technology and interactions with other arts educators online and sharing examples of good practices backed up with appropriate pedagogical frameworks, we can encourage other arts educators to facilitate effective online arts classrooms and be supportive of online arts learning communities [49]. Figure 4 summarizes key issues that, if addressed, can lead online arts learning to sustainable pedagogies.

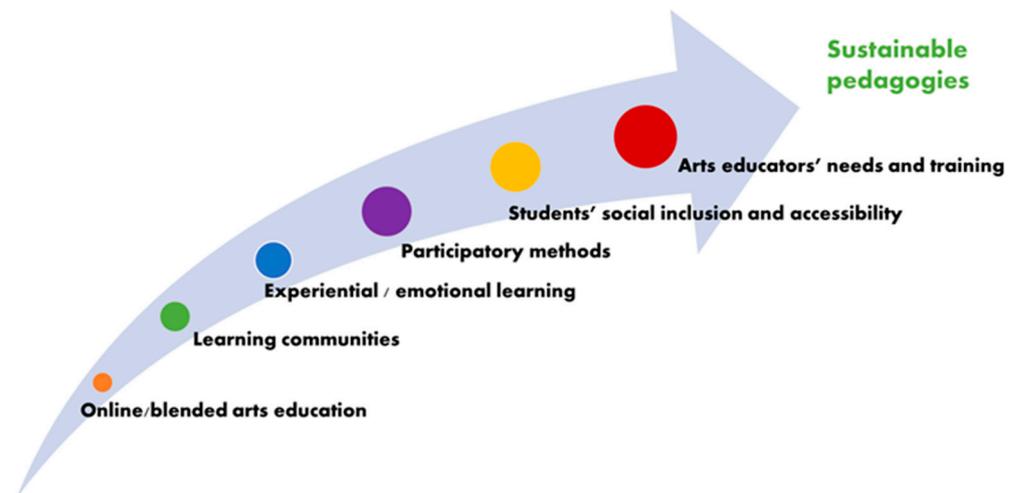


Figure 4. Online learning in its way towards sustainability.

## 6. Conclusions

In teaching arts education courses, whether blended or online, the academics in this study sought to build a learning community where the students, the instructors, the community, and the content digitally connected with each other in a constantly evolving web of interactions that nurture inclusivity, engagement, and participation. They aimed to structure a learning environment where student teachers could reflect on their identities and connect themselves with others, their environment, and real-life issues while creating imaginary futures through their artworks, creative writing, music pieces, or drama enactments. In short, they were in constant search of ways to implement sustainable and sustainability pedagogies. These results echo arts educators' worldwide voices for the role of arts in education [10,23,38] as well as the findings of specific studies on the multilayered structures of online art learning [39]. What we also learned from this study are arts educators' current and probably future needs and challenges to fully implement online or blended arts education courses in a sustainable manner. A limitation of this study is that these needs and challenges might not be applicable to all settings and countries. We only studied a few academics in five European countries where specific educational policies and structures of HEIs exist. Furthermore, as we aimed to understand needs in different arts disciplines, we might have overlooked needs that are specific to only one of the arts disciplines.

There seems to be a need to expand our thinking on how to sustain the experiential aspect of the arts and strengthen communication and the process of feeling connected with others while learning in the arts. To this end, the next step of project CARE/SS consists of transforming already existing arts education courses or organizing new ones for student teachers and in-service teachers who endorse digital education. To further support them, funding for the implementation of the courses will include software pro versions and the 'Arts in a box' methodology to address technological and experiential issues. 'Arts in a box' is not an established methodology but one suggested by the CARE/SS project, inspired by the Lab-in-a-box methodology [50]. During the pandemic, there were reports [38] where teachers assembled packets of art supplies and materials for students to take home, but no research findings exist on the benefits of these. In particular, boxes with arts materials will be prepared for the students to ensure the quality of engagement and experimentation in the arts disciplines. The CARE/SS project is not about emergency remote teaching, and provision can be made regarding learners' needs. The 'Arts in a box' methodology will aim to make artistic learning accessible, engaging, and adaptable to different settings; it is expected to ensure the quality of the materials, the accessibility of all to specific materials, gain of knowledge through direct experience and development of a range of skills through engaging and enjoyable activities. Further, it might encourage further the sense of learning

together (using the same materials/tools to address a specific problem) while preserving the ability to make choices and personalize their responses. Along with the need to revisit the evaluation model, providing learners with the same materials/tools might also facilitate the evaluation process.

By the end of the CARE/SS project, we seek to achieve a better understanding of the multilayered structures of blended and online learning in the field of arts, focusing on socially engaged arts as a set of relational practices concerned with the process of creating sustainable worlds [6]. At the same time, we aspire to offer suggestions for a qualitative change in HEIs education policy. The need for a change in educational policies based on additional research is reported in recent articles [38]. These suggestions will point towards a future where the digital transformation of HEIs preserves what makes arts different: their embodied learning and the connections that arise among participants in the art classroom.

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## Appendix A

In this section, the Interview Schedule is presented. It includes ten main questions with follow-up questions.

1. Could you talk a little bit about yourself as a lecturer (field(s) of expertise, experience, interests)?
2. What kind of experience do you have with online teaching? (Note: academics will probably mention Emergency Remote Teaching and Distance learning under normal circumstances or blended learning). Follow up: were your experiences negative or positive? Did you have any support?
3. Think about one online/distance course of yours. Please tell me about the course (content, students, context).
4. Why did you decide to teach it as an online course? Were you required to do this? Follow up: Have you taught a F2F version of the same (or similar) course in the past? How would you compare the two in terms of success, reaching objectives, student satisfaction, etc.?

5. When designing the course, what did you have in mind? Please describe the process in as detailed a manner as possible. Follow up: Did you have any issues with ‘translating’ the arts content/context online? Or did you ‘rethink’ the content of your discipline in the online context? What kind of experiences (familiarity) do you have with new media in your discipline? Do you feel that you need to use ‘unique’ technologies? Do you feel that you need support for creative use of available technologies?
6. Please take me through the course site and explain each element. Follow up: Why did you decide to use it? What purpose does it serve?
7. If you teach the course again next year, what/why will you change? Follow-up: How successful did you feel the course was? Did you have any negative experiences with the course because of the mode of teaching? Did you receive any feedback from the students?
8. What advice would you give a lecturer designing an online course for the first time?
9. If relevant to your case: What was the role of the students in the course design?
10. Would you like to add anything else you feel is important?

### Appendix B

- Assignments (instructions, ways for students to ask for clarification and/or help, feedback from lecturer)
  - Collaborative assignments? Why or why not?
  - Portfolio?
- Types of feedback & assessment
- Lecturer’s beliefs about the importance of:
  - Student-student interactions
  - Student-instructor interactions
  - In general interactions
  - In online course interactions specifically
- F2F meetings (if blended) OR synchronous meetings. How many? When? What are they used for –Community construction? Giving instructions?
- Is there personalization of the teacher-student relationship? How?
- Social relationships among students. Are they actively encouraged? How?
- How can students get pedagogical and/or technical assistance?
- Online discussions. Who initiates them? In what way? Are they compulsory? What is their purpose?
- lecturer participation in online discussions. How much? For what purpose?
- Lecturer’s pedagogical approach. Cognitivist? Constructivist? Other? Undefined?
- Have you received any feedback specifically from students on your course? If so, please describe it.
- Institutional support—kind, frequency, etc.
- Institution’s policy

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