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# Art Gallery Education in New Zealand during COVID-19

## The Emergence of a Community of Practice

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article describes the unprecedented coming together of New Zealand art gallery educators to respond to the challenges of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This newly formed community of practice met virtually three times at critical points. At each stage, new concerns were discussed and understandings evolved. The gallery educators were able to approach shared issues cooperatively, enabling mutual support to a degree that had hitherto not been possible. By the end of these meetings, gallery educators were reestablishing their regular teaching practice with the integration of many of the innovations of the period. Additionally, the meetings fulfilled a preexisting desire for closer contact and professional support, and thus proved to be the foundation of an ongoing national professional group for New Zealand art gallery educators.

■ **KEYWORDS:** art gallery education, community of practice, COVID-19, innovative pedagogy, museum learning

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic brought art gallery<sup>1</sup> educators in Aotearoa New Zealand together in an unprecedented way. This group met nationally by Zoom at three critical points from mid-March to mid-June 2020, enabling mutual support to rise to a level that had hitherto not been possible. Prior to the lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand art gallery educators had never had a distinct professional group that recognized the particular role and demands of their specific profession. My PhD research over the period of 2016 to 2019 found a strong sense of goodwill between gallery educators and a desire for contact with others in the field (McNaughton 2019). Despite this, a means of connection did not arise until the COVID-19 lockdown.

Written as notes from the field, this report captures the rapid revitalization of a community of art gallery educator practitioners over a 12-week period as they responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes of communicating with schools; catering to the family and home learning that utilize everyday materials and local resources; how to go about professional upskilling; and preparing for an uncertain immediate future are discussed. Throughout this unprecedented time, the underlying student-centered focus so central to art gallery education in New Zealand remained strong.



## **The COVID-19 Pandemic Situation in New Zealand**

New Zealand used a four-level alert level system to combat COVID-19, rapidly moving to the most severe level soon after its introduction. On 25 March 2020, the country entered Level Four, with a nationwide lockdown and closed borders. This lasted for five weeks before shifting to Level Three on 27 April. This level maintained most lockdown conditions including school education operating from home. Continuing for another two weeks, it moved to Level Two on 13 May, with schools reopening five days later on 18 May. While Level Two lifted remaining lockdown restrictions, it still maintained social distancing and stressed being able to trace contacts. For this reason, although museums and galleries were able to reopen at the commencement of Level Two, regular visits by school classes did not necessarily start up immediately. Level One commenced on 8 June with all remaining limitations lifted, except for border restrictions. This unprecedented period started on 21 March 2020, reducing to Level One after 12 weeks. Seven of these weeks had the country in lockdown, where almost everyone stayed at home and students could not attend school. New Zealanders experienced life in an extraordinary way.

### ***A Brief Description of New Zealand's Art Gallery Education Sector***

Lockdown was a time of drawing together for art gallery educators in New Zealand. As a community spread throughout Aotearoa with no professional organization, prior to COVID-19—and despite feelings of connection among its members—the group did not meet up. My recent national study found art gallery education in New Zealand to have a distinct and coherent philosophy and practice reflecting the context in which it has developed (McNaughton 2019). Its programs were student-centered, with a focus on hands-on artmaking as a tool for developing the conceptual understandings that arose from interaction with art exhibitions. Within this framework, community engagement and learning partnerships were seen as important, with the gallery as a place to develop important cultural understandings relating to its locality and beyond. Significant influences on the sector were found to be Learning Experiences Outside the Classroom (LEOTC) contestable governmental funding, which has particular performance criteria; the fact that New Zealand art galleries are cultural institutions that operate within a constitutionally bicultural nation; and the fact that New Zealand art galleries are often situated in regional cities.

### ***Gallery Education within the Wider Sector of Education Outside the Classroom***

In the early 2000s, many gallery educators participated in Museum Educators Aotearoa New Zealand (MEANZ), a group for educators from cultural institutions such as museums and galleries as well as from venues such as zoos and historic parks, which offered biennial conferences allowing in-person contact for attendees. Around 2010, MEANZ moved into recess, and that means of connection was lost. MEANZ was reborn as Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga, the Association of Educators beyond the Classroom, in 2019, and during the COVID-19 pandemic it held weekly sessions via Zoom video conferencing. These sessions focused on a range of pertinent professional matters, with some relating specifically to the COVID-19 situation and some being more general. Overall, 12 online seminars were offered over the COVID-19 period. These were attended by a number of art gallery educators.

## ***Lockdown Contact***

My PhD research asked whether New Zealand art gallery educators had a specific pedagogy despite their lack of professional contact. This obviously led me to have comprehensive contact with this group. A constant refrain was the feeling of professional isolation and the desire to have contact with others in the field. The COVID-19 lockdown presented an opportunity for me to act on this matter. I contacted several other gallery educators, largely via Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga. During lockdown, it soon became apparent that members of our disparate professional group were experiencing similar issues within their institutions separately. Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga addressed a number of these issues such as the necessity for a rapid increase in use of computer technology, but my feeling was that art gallery educators would benefit from specific contact with each other to address issues relating to their particular profession. After discussion with peers, I scheduled a meeting via Zoom for 21 April, which was to take place while New Zealand was still in full lockdown and before any gallery educators returned to work at their venues and might have other pressing issues to consider.

The aim of this first meeting was to strengthen our sense of community by enabling more contact with each other. This meeting gave us the chance to see each other's faces and share our approaches to and concerns around our education programs at this unusual and memorable point in time. The invitation was spread as widely as possible, with gallery educators passing the invitation on to others. New Zealand is a small country, which had fewer than 50 specialist art gallery educators at the time, and this enabled the inclusion of almost everyone working in the field.

### **The First Meeting: 21 April 2020**

As anticipated, this first Zoom session was enthusiastically attended by most gallery educators identified, and many who did not attend expressed regret at missing it. As an initial meeting, there was a significant focus on introducing ourselves. This nurturing of the development of a sense of community was important to the group members.

Experienced gallery educators were pleased to reconnect with those who they had not seen for some time:

Since working at (my current gallery) I haven't been as connected with other educators outside my region as I used to be, so this is definitely a great time to reach out and reconnect.

Lovely to meet all those wonderful people. I've known some of them for many years now . . . so, what a privilege.

Additionally, since New Zealand gallery educators are a constantly changing and geographically spread population (McNaughton 2019), members were pleased to connect with those they had not previously met:

It was lovely to hear from other art educators in the country as well as see familiar faces.

It was such a pleasure to see everyone, and to virtually meet you! I've been hearing your name for years but hadn't had the opportunity.

Those who were newer to the field expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to connect with others around the country with the same role as them:

It would be great to meet other art educators working in Aotearoa.

To be able to see each other was cited as a good thing, particularly at this time during lockdown. It was seen to improve motivation for working from home as well as to help us remember we can contact each other for support. For those who usually worked as sole educator in their gallery, this was considered particularly beneficial.

The meeting had a simple agenda, which was to introduce ourselves and talk about “what was on top” for each of us during the lockdown period. There was a spread of activities and concerns that depended on a variety of factors including funding and its varied contract obligations; the gallery status (at least three were closed before lockdown for a variety of reasons such as redevelopment or major exhibition changeovers); the size of the gallery education team; the demands and focus of gallery management; and resourcing levels. It was apparent that many of us were facing similar issues despite having little prior contact with each other.

Discussion covered issues of learning from home and engaging with families; school learning and working with classroom teachers; preparing for an uncertain immediate future; focusing on the local to make our programs distinctive; working with galleries’ collections of art and touring exhibitions; challenges of lockdown; and the value and pleasure of connection with each other.

### ***Family and Home Learning***

This meeting took place during lockdown, so naturally providing educational materials for home use was discussed. Institutions with LEOTC contracts largely described activities for at-home school learning, while those without were freer to focus more on family activities independent of this, some of which were designed to be used by families for relaxation and well-being. Bianca van Leeuwen from Christchurch Art Gallery, whose program was not funded by LEOTC, described one example of this where they had created online coloring pictures based on collection artworks. These were accompanied by questions to engage families in discussion around ideas relating to these artworks and were provided through the gallery’s blog.

Social media such as Instagram was also used by galleries to provide family-focused programs in place of onsite sessions and to develop and increase these audiences during lockdown and beyond. The provision of such online programs was something that many had little experience of previously. One gallery educator explained: “There (were) a lot of steep learning curves going on.” Participants described how developing these online programs for families at home enabled them to practice using new technologies before developing online programs for schools, helping them to work out what might be most effective for them. An emphasis for the family programs was developing resources that could be used easily and called for commonplace art materials that might be available at home. These resources were created to connect to communities on a variety of levels. Blogs, gallery websites, and social media were all modes of delivery.

An example of this was Dunedin Public Art Gallery’s series of short online art workshops called *DPAG Art @ Home* for children and their families. Workshops used minimal materials and were accessed through the gallery’s website. The DPAG produced these resources as an initial offering while devising an ongoing plan for their education services.

Attendant Otago University academic, David Bell, noted that New Zealand art gallery website resources promoted their educational experiences, and this was evident in the contributions to this meeting. He felt that education and learning had been made particularly explicit in New Zealand art galleries’ website content during the lockdown period, which he saw as being in contrast to a tendency of many overseas galleries to focus foremost on the “treasures” of their collections, leading to a more object-centered than student-centered approach.

### ***Working with Classroom Teachers and Schools***

Given the student-centered approach integral to New Zealand art gallery education (McNaughton 2019), it was predictable that gallery educators wanted to contact schools to find out what they needed. There was a spread of time frames and approaches to contacting schools. Some had made contact prior to lockdown, some used their gallery's education advisory group for direction, and some waited to contact schools until well into lockdown. Unsurprisingly, there was a strong sense of uncertainty, so it was hard to decide what action to take. LEOTC-funded gallery educators were asked by the Ministry of Education not to contact classroom teachers at all in the earlier stages to avoid increasing stress on an already stressed community. However, this Ministry directive made collaboration difficult, and ironically may have delayed the development of programs, and thus support, for classroom teachers in some cases. As it turned out, this ban on contact did not last long, but at the time no indication of its duration was given.

Melissa McDonald from the Tauranga Art Gallery described how they were "trying to identify audiences now [that] schools are in a different form. Trying to maintain contact with our schools and teachers while not burdening them . . . Letting them know that we are here for support but not oversaturating them." Gallery educators wanted to make resources that would be useful to classroom teachers, to find out what would work for them, and, importantly, to find out what online platform was used in their schools.

Secondary-level education was a separate consideration, largely because of its specific standards for examination. It was noted that it was challenging to know what to provide for this level because of uncertainty over how the year would progress and whether examinations would be rescheduled. The New Zealand school terms had already been adjusted with holidays brought forward at the commencement of lockdown to give families, teachers, and gallery educators time to adjust to the new delivery format. Time frame was seen as critical for secondary students. One gallery had used the lockdown time to develop a new resource around a specific examination standard, while another provided generalized resources at this time. During lockdown, Ashburton Art Gallery educator Simone Barnsdale was able to continue working online on a long-term project with local secondary schools that involved responding to artworks from its collection. This educational development was to culminate in an exhibition at the gallery.

### ***Preparing for an Uncertain Immediate Future***

During the meeting, much discussion was given to different possible scenarios for art gallery education programs depending on the consequences of the pandemic. Developing a timeline and a series of stages, in accordance with each lockdown level, to provide education services for schools were seen as important. Those gallery educators who were LEOTC-funded had been specifically directed to these goals. Additionally, consideration was given to how to entice schools back when the time came. Some educators had been developing resources and programs to use at a later point in time, especially after returning to the gallery building.

A common concern was the need for the rapid development of a variety of online programs and options. Different programs would be needed for different phases. Taking into account social distancing concerns, institutions were considering their options for the provision of programs after lockdown, with a variety of virtual, onsite, and in-school innovations suggested. At this stage, most thought that, moving to Level Two, art gallery education programs would probably still be virtual, but that they would be more curriculum-focused.

At the time of the first meeting, programs for schools had a strong focus on fun and well-being, and specific curriculum links were considered less important, and this was echoed by the

LEOTC funder, the Ministry of Education. Isabelle Mathys from Tauranga Art Gallery talked about “serving families that are looking for creative activities they can embed into their learning from home.” LEOTC contracts influenced the development of school programs at this time. While most of those institutions with these contracts were to deliver in the curriculum area of art, some could deliver in the area of social science. Of course, some institutions did not have contracts at all.

Over the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Ministry of Education had online meetings with each of its LEOTC providers, letting them know that the usual criteria for success, such as visit numbers, were not a priority for the period. Contractors were encouraged to simply provide the most appropriate services possible to meet schools’ needs at that point in time. This decreased stress and allowed for innovative delivery, which was interesting and stimulating for providers. As I stated in the meeting, “I could never usually do what I’m doing right now because I’ve usually got that obligation of the contract and at the moment (the funders) just don’t care as long as it’s a positive thing for students and schools like what we’re doing.”

### ***Keeping It Local: Making Our Programs Special***

It was a common sentiment that, with the flood of free access to resources from all over the world during the pandemic, it was necessary to situate programs carefully and make them worthwhile in this context. Many of the gallery educators were ensuring that their programs emphasized the local, relating them to the children in their catchments. In my own programs at The Suter Art Gallery in Nelson, at Level Four I sought to focus on the local, provide hands-on learning using easily accessible materials, and feature my face and voice as a point of familiarity for local children who knew me as a local identity. This was intended to increase normality and stability for them in a time of change, when they could feel stressed and insecure. Claire Mepham from Expressions Whirinaki, an arts and entertainment center in Upper Hutt, decided, in the absence of an art collection or touring exhibitions, to use local history, which was location-specific, to provide a point of difference to other more general resources available online. She allied with other regional specialists to enrich her art gallery learning programs. There was an overall desire by the art gallery educators at the meeting to create resources that could connect to their local communities in a variety of ways.

### ***Collection and Touring Exhibitions***

Many galleries had an increased focus on their permanent collections, due to factors such as lack of access to current exhibitions, lack of funds moving forward to pay for touring exhibitions, and the need to highlight the value of their particular venue. Developing new resources for teaching with collection artworks was considered positive for many gallery educators, who were often fond of and knowledgeable about specific collection artworks. Where possible, gallery educators were making online activities connecting to their collection and current or past exhibitions. Christchurch Art Gallery provided a writing competition *Blue Globe: Stories from Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū*, asking school students to respond to artworks from their collection creatively. However, for those who worked at institutions without collections, there was added stress around how to develop programs during closure and the need to create innovations such as that described by Claire Mepham above.

## Challenges

The gallery educators faced significant challenges in large part due to the suddenness of the change. New Zealanders were given only two days to prepare for lockdown. There were substantial limits to the possibilities for the provision of online gallery education programs due to lack of technology available at home for the gallery educators. While they made the most of the technology available, and reported enjoying the new learning, online delivery was often necessarily quite simple. It was a challenge to get a range of educational resources available online on potentially unfamiliar platforms in the very short time frame. As well as these limitations for the gallery educators, they also needed to consider their students' access to resources in their homes and develop programs with easily available materials, such as this example from The Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt (Figure 1):



**Figure 1.** An example of The Dowse Art Museum's art challenge using materials found easily at home. Reproduced with permission of The Dowse Art Museum.

Another challenge was that, institutionally speaking, education might not be a primary focus of galleries at this time. Given the enormity of the potential impact of COVID-19, a gallery might focus more on rescheduling exhibition programs or on how to keep its institution running with diminished funding. Some educators had difficulty obtaining necessary support from their institutions to develop their programs during lockdown. One example was an educator being unable to access the gallery's blog to post material. Additionally, "all the work we are doing is not necessarily being recognized by others within our institution . . . complex and developed things are being reduced to a short statement on Instagram." This could be challenging and disheartening.

One particular challenge in response to this short timeline and lack of resources was described by Iokapeta Magele-Suamasi, Learning and Outreach Manager at the Auckland Art Gallery, as “making sure the educational principles we uphold are present in the learning resources produced during the COVID-19 period (in contrast to the reactive content of social media engagement).” As a manager, she wanted to ensure that the resources that her team created were sound and enduring so they would be useful in an ongoing way and beyond the life of any specific exhibition.

On the other hand, many of the educators were enjoying the change from regular routines and the opportunity to provide innovative programs. They were enjoying learning new things. While some were managing to work on aspects of their job that they seldom got around to doing, such as updating resources and their websites, others were focused on developing new resources.

This first meeting resulted in enthusiasm to continue to support and collaborate with each other through this group. I offered to keep, maintain, and circulate a list of New Zealand art gallery educators. As the weeks went by during the COVID-19 pandemic and things remained very uncertain, it became obvious that another meeting was called for.

### **The Second Meeting: 19 May 2020**

The second meeting took place during a time of transition, when some educators had returned to their galleries and others were still working from home. It had been four weeks since the first meeting, and since then New Zealand had moved through the levels from Level Four to Level Two with students once again attending school onsite. At the time of this meeting, gallery educators were considering the different possibilities of providing gallery education during this period of change.

#### ***Uncertainty***

There was deep uncertainty in this time of transition between lockdown and reopening. As Ross Cunningham, Assistant Director of the Corban Estate Arts Centre in Henderson, West Auckland, explained: “The challenges we’re facing now are the challenges of most of us here, what does it look like now and what does it look like going forward? . . . The longer-term challenge is about what’s going to happen in a month, in three months, in six months, in 12 months. To what extent will we be opening up? Will we be able to offer things onsite, and to what extent will that be? Will we have to embrace the model which has more substantial offsite delivery or more reduced onsite delivery?” He believed that his staff needed to be flexible in working out how their programs would have to change and adapt in an ongoing way.

#### ***Equity***

Equity was another issue at this time. Providers were considering possible barriers for students in lower socioeconomic schools and designing activities suitable for their various circumstances and to enhance their well-being. One aspect of this was described as “giv(ing) them opportunities to self-reflect about what they’ve been through going through and articulate that stuff.” There was also the concern that the school students did not “get too bogged down with the academic side of it . . . They’ve been stuck in a situation and their parents are stressed. It’s going to be hard for them now because they’re going to be expected to knuckle down and get on with it back at school . . . that’s something we could offer them in some way, some fun. They need it in their lives.”

Thought was also being given to the ongoing viability of activities such as family programming and after-school lessons. Programs would need to be developed for the future that would take into account fiscal issues, including the fact that families may have less money to spend on activities such as gallery visits.

### ***Bookings***

Bookings for visits had been canceled or postponed for all during lockdown and beyond. Progressing through the government's levels for COVID-19, the gallery educators started to consider how to provide alternatives to these original bookings. Some had commenced rebooking visits. Programs were redesigned to suit the conditions of each new phase. Some visits were provided virtually, and a few gallery educators were considering visiting schools to deliver their programs.

### ***Going into Schools with Programs***

Since visiting galleries was difficult at that time, having the gallery educators go to schools seemed a suitable alternative to some. Established gallery programs could not be directly transferred to school settings because the circumstances, facilities, and availability of materials and resources would all be different. However, some institutions had visited schools prior to COVID-19, so were able to adapt and use established resources.

Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Art Gallery, also in West Auckland, was planning to use an existing resource for visits to schools. *Art in a Box*, which comprised an authentic artwork in a box with an accompanying lesson plan and workshop, had been very successful in the past, during the institution's redevelopment. Additionally, they were also considering developing *Art in a Bag* which would provide all the resources and learning materials for an interactive lesson for school classes to do independently, delivered via courier.

The gallery educators discussed the paradox that while having no visiting groups in the gallery reduced risk, going into schools might potentially promote disease transmission and additionally could put gallery educators themselves in unsafe positions, with exposure to many different people. As well as this, travelling between schools would provide the potential to contaminate different populations. There was inconsistency in that parents were often not allowed into the schools at that point, but some schools wanted and allowed visits from museum educators. For some these in-school visits would be considered later at a stage when it seemed safer to do so. There was a degree of nervousness expressed by the gallery educators about going into schools.

One museum had been considering visiting schools from early in the lockdown and was about to start this at the time of the second meeting. These visits were in response to significant requests from schools. The educators established strict protocols for cleaning, taking materials away to wipe down thus providing a high degree of reassurance for schools. Social distancing would be strictly observed, and also, they planned to offer a reduced timetable (to give time for the extra preparation and cleaning) which will gradually increase. This option was provided for classes who had to cancel due to lockdown.

### ***Resuming Lessons in the Gallery***

Many considered that gallery visits by school groups would not commence in earnest for at least two more months. Despite this, many had had requests for services at the time of the meeting. Isabelle Mathys from Tauranga Art Gallery noted that even if classroom teachers were keen to go ahead with onsite gallery visits, there were a number of issues that might impede these such

as principals' and parents' concerns. Thus, this enthusiasm for a return to regular activity would not necessarily translate into actual visits.

One gallery planned to recommence onsite delivery of workshops very soon after this second meeting, due to demand from teachers wanting visits as soon as possible. Hosting small groups, such as gifted or after-school workshops at their galleries, was one way some gallery educators perceived they would be able to meet the health and safety requirements of COVID-19 in New Zealand. Tauranga Art Gallery decided to try holding workshops called "Mindful Making" that combined adults and children in small groups working alongside each other. One benefit of this was the extra adults to help with the management and emotional support of the students. There would be approximately eight participants in each workshop, with a family sitting at each table.

A number of gallery educators noted that, with the classroom teacher and other supporters, student numbers in onsite group visits would be very low and their financial viability as well as the logistical challenges for schools might be issues. This meant that, while theoretically onsite delivery might be conceivable, in fact it might be virtually impossible at this point.

Figuring out health and safety issues, and particularly how to manage materials safely, was an important concern. The cleaning of equipment between visits was considered difficult logistically. Claire Mepham from Expressions Whirinaki suggested introducing the use of disposable equipment such as egg cartons for paint trays or painting with cotton buds. She felt that there was much resetting between classes usually, such as laying out fresh newspaper on tables, and that, with extra help, this might be manageable if the groups were small. She described it thus: "I was a bit overwhelmed with the cleaning situation (but then I thought) . . . Maybe the combination of some disposable, some cleanable and small numbers might actually make that in the realms of being able to do that." She ended up using largely recycled material, gathered up over time, for the disposable element, thus making the activity more sustainable.

Health and safety during COVID-19 was also a significant concern for schools. Many gallery educators felt that schools would not be able to, or would be nervous about, using buses until the risk of infection lessened, and that this issue would decrease their ability to visit.

Long-time gallery educator John Neumegen from Dunedin Public Art Gallery suggested offering tour-only visits with no studio component at the gallery as a way to avoid the risk of cross-contamination between schools and the added pressure of repeated cleaning of surfaces and materials. His view was that gallery-only visits would allow more time to engage with the artworks on display, and that, in the interim, a practical art-making workshop could be provided on a video or a sheet for back at school. Neumegen also suggested using a range of varied approaches for working in the gallery and interacting with artworks, such as students using dramatic techniques to express their views on the latter and to show what they learned.

### ***Online Offerings***

One consideration was how to cater for classes that had missed bookings due to lockdown, particularly if their visit was to a temporary exhibition that had since finished. For me, my three-year contract was contingent on delivering specific programs based around a specific theme, Tuia 250.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, my main teaching component for this was scheduled during what turned out to be lockdown. Consequently, few classes were able to attend the program and the related exhibition was to be closed by the time school visits resumed.

My solution to this problem was providing an online version of the visit with a virtual gallery and an instructional video for the practical art-making component. Students could have a gallery visit as usual, but this would be a virtual opportunity to move around independently while

looking at and discussing artworks. The second part of the lesson was a hands-on art-making workshop provided on YouTube. Additionally, classroom teachers also received a comprehensive education pack with curriculum links, pre- and post-visit ideas, and other support material. Those aspects were intended to amount to the content of a regular school visit to The Suter Art Gallery, and a bonus was that the teachers could decide how to break up the different parts of the lesson. This delivery of the program cut out the usual time constraints of visiting the gallery, and thus made it more flexible.

Auckland Art Gallery provided “Art Bubbles” on Instagram for students and families to create at home. As the pandemic progressed, the team decided to develop some of these into activities for primary school teachers to use in their classes. Avoiding the stringent protocols of face-to-face delivery of education programs at that time, they enabled schools to access the gallery’s resources virtually. Additionally, not having their studio space available for student classes during Level Two led them to consider online alternatives such as “vignettes” or short videos, either working with local artists or using artworks from the gallery’s collection, with artmaking demonstrations for teachers to use in their classrooms.

The decision to provide online programs was not universal. The Corban Estate Arts Centre decided, because they were not technically set up for it and students had already been having a great deal of online activity during the lockdown, that it was better to develop different activities that they believed would activate other parts of students’ brains through experiential and sensory activities such as “The Humble Rubbing” activity developed by educator Jean Stewart, where students explore textures around their home environment using frottage (Stewart 2020).

### ***Family Learning***

As well as considering school programs, some gallery educators were considering how to provide family visit activities that involved no touching, such as the use of QR codes as an alternative to paper and pencils or other hands-on art materials. In this vein, Te Tuhi educator Briana Woolliams shifted her focus to creating free digital family activity packs. Te Tuhi is a contemporary art space in Pakuranga, Auckland. One of these packs consisted of a self-guided activity based on *Te Atarangi II* by Michael Parekōwhai, a towering sculpture outside the gallery.<sup>3</sup> Here, families were still encouraged to explore art and share ideas in a fun and creative way outdoors. Woolliams explained that keeping families outside the venue might reduce parents’ anxiety surrounding contamination in confined spaces.

The level of cleaning needed for drop-in activities at Level Two made some gallery educators reluctant to offer family activities at that point, especially knowing that these restrictions would last for a limited period.

### ***Specific COVID-19 Displays***

Some galleries were quickly moving to develop displays relating to the COVID-19 lockdown. In one example of this, The Suter Art Gallery was going to display selected artworks from a local children’s art project that occurred during lockdown, which celebrated the efforts of essential workers. This project display was to be supplemented with artworks from the gallery’s collection relating to essential services, such as Rita Angus’s *Apple Pickers* (Figure 2), which is based on the artist’s experiences as an essential worker during World War II. This exhibition would provide the basis for school visits when the gallery reopened, and therefore provide a timely learning program:



Figure 2. Rita Angus (New Zealand, 1908–1970), *The Apple Pickers* 1944, oil on canvas. Collection of the Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Image provided by The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū.

### ***Sharing Important Ideas Underlying Our Pedagogy***

The second meeting focused largely on the logistics of coping in these difficult times, but another positive thing that emerged was a forum in which to discuss important issues such as ethical matters and contractual concerns. As noted above, New Zealand gallery educators face many similar issues, and hitherto have generally addressed these separately within their respective institutions. In this meeting, attendees heard how others had had success dealing with difficult issues, and they were able to use the experiences and ideas of others to develop new professional understanding.

In addition to this, gallery educators expressed their appreciation of the educational resources provided by other institutions, which members were quick to share. Other sharing included comparing charges for programs; discussing professional development opportunities (such as Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga, the Association of Educators beyond the Classroom Facebook page);<sup>4</sup> comparing resourcing and marketing approaches; talking about institutional support for education; and discussing the benefits and difficulties of different funding models. Sole educators in particular expressed gratitude at this sharing of ideas.

## **The Third Meeting: 23 June 2020**

This final meeting of the period took place on 23 June. By this point, many educators were back to their regular gallery teaching, and this was the focus of much of the discussion. However, the ongoing impact of the lockdown was noted. Many were considering how their innovations over this time could have an ongoing life. In one example of this, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's education team was considering adapting its usual PDF-based educational resources that accompany school visits to include a Google Slides component.

Briana Woolliams from Te Tuhi found that, even at this point, many schools still wanted online delivery via Zoom, and for her this had a side benefit of audience development, since these requests came from schools that did not regularly attend her education programs due to their distance from the gallery.

In contrast, other gallery educators noted that in their institutions, post-lockdown, many students had "digital fatigue" and that those who were visiting galleries were very keen for hands-on learning experiences. Additionally, there was an ongoing emphasis on supporting students emotionally. As Fiona Wilcock from Tauranga Art Gallery commented: "It's all about well-being at the moment. It's exciting to know that teachers see us and [that] the art-making experiences they get at our gallery as integral to their kids' well-being."

This meeting occurred as those funded by LEOTC were required to submit six-monthly reports and were wondering how to report on the exciting and innovative programs that had been delivered over the period, but that did not meet normal evaluation criteria. In general, there was an emphasis on using narrative proof of the programs' value provided by service-users rather than using numerical data.

## **Conclusion**

It is ironic that it took the seclusion of the COVID-19 lockdown to bring the sector of art gallery education in New Zealand together in an organized way, thus putting an end to the isolation cited so strongly in my doctoral research. These three meetings provided the foundation for an ongoing national professional group to support pedagogy and connection within the sector and to provide inspiration to others to continue reaching out to their communities in meaningful ways. Overall, many of the gallery educators considered the lockdown to be an opportunity. As Ross Cunningham of the Corban Estate Arts Centre stated: "It's been a good professional development opportunity for the teaching staff . . . just to further imbed and remind them of what they know and give them the opportunity to articulate in a different way. I think it's been a really interesting opportunity for all of us." Flexibility of approach has been considered integral to the role of the gallery educator in New Zealand (McNaughton 2019), and this is perhaps why such positivity was expressed for the many possibilities for new approaches and program offerings developed over this unusual period.

Gallery education is a distinct pedagogical practice that acts as a conduit in many ways (McNaughton 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these connections significantly, as we have seen. The professional sector drew closer, both specifically for art gallery educators, but also, more broadly, for all learning-outside-the-classroom educators through Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga. In contrast, logistical distancing from education service-users such as classroom teachers, schools, and students was imposed. Despite this obstacle, the underlying student-centered focus so central to art gallery education in New Zealand remained. Virtually unified, while physically separated, gallery educators supported each other and reached out to their students and

their families at home in their “bubbles.” They developed and shared educational resources, but perhaps more importantly they provided emotional support and connection through art in this unprecedented time of physical separation. Collectively, these notes from the field demonstrate how students, families, teachers, and art gallery educators were able to benefit from the ability of art to facilitate well-being in uncertain times.

## Acknowledgments

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## NOTES

1. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the term “art gallery” describes institutions for the display of art. These institutions may or may not hold collections of artworks. In some countries, such as the United States, such institutions may be referred to as “art museums.”
2. “Tuia—Encounters 250 was a commemoration in 2019 marking 250 years since the first onshore encounters between Māori and Pākehā in 1769.” See the following Ministry for Culture and Heritage site: <https://mch.govt.nz/tuia250>.
3. *Michael Parekōwhai, Atarangi II*, Te Tuhi, can be seen at <https://tetuhi.art/exhibition/michael-parekowhai-atarangi-ii/>.
4. Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga: Association of Educators beyond the Classroom, <https://www.facebook.com/TePuTiakiManaTaonga/>.

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