

NSEADcreate – case study #3

Kitchen cupboard art

Barbara Balmer

On Monday 27th April Beijing City International School (BCIS) opened its campus after 93 days in lockdown welcoming back the Grade 12 Warrior class of 2020. Head of School, Julie Lawton, led the emotional welcoming committee of Beijing-based staff who lined the walkway to cheer each student as they made their way into school.

As school closed for Chinese New Year (CNY) on the 22nd January, whispers of a dangerous new virus in Wuhan had begun to circulate. I had no idea what was coming as I instructed my students to leave their sketchbooks and enjoy some quality family time. Midway through the holiday, word came that school was closed until further notice; we would begin on-line learning on 3rd February. Coronavirus had taken hold in Wuhan.

The BCIS mission is empowering and inspiring through challenge and compassion, living the mission is something that all BCISers are encouraged to do. My own first challenge was deciding what online art teaching and learning would look like and what it would be. I decided the first project would be non-digital, I wanted students to make, to get dirty, and to have an artifact that they could display in their homes as a symbol of compassion and hope for those locked down in Wuhan. I borrowed a lantern project from South Korea that fulfilled the Senior Leadership Team brief to use project-based tasks. I was aware that I was being over-prescriptive but so much of our daily lives were now in crisis and out of our control, I wanted to take away some of the decision making, to bring some calmness, I wanted my artists to make an object, without fear.

The second challenge; my students don't have paper, pencils, paints most of the basic materials to make with are not kept in my students' homes, they are IT rich, making materials poor. I scoured my kitchen cupboards for materials finding tea, coffee, and recycled takeaway paper bags, newspaper, envelopes as options for surfaces to work on hoping that a mark-making materials and devices could be found.



Warrior Mascot greeting students on their first day back

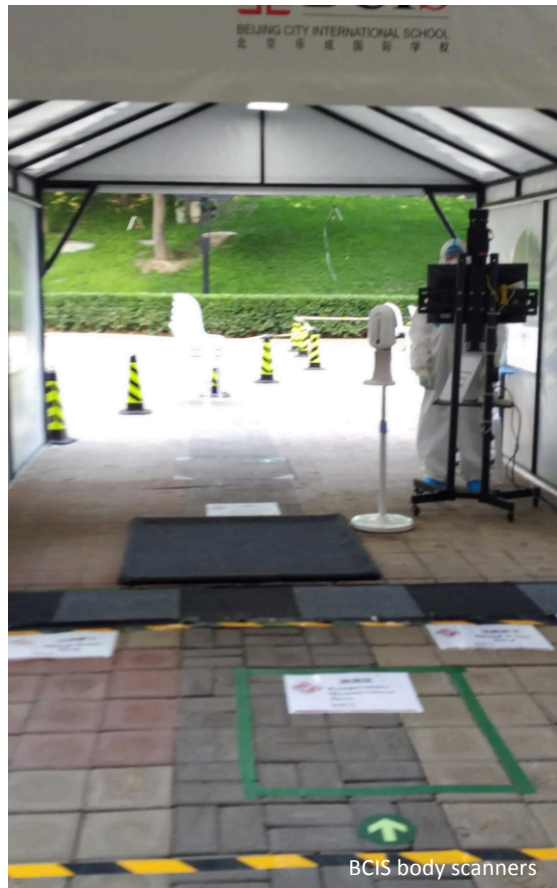


As online learning began in Beijing the British Government called for all UK citizens in China to leave while they still could. I initially planned a four-week project, and for the first time in my teaching career, I made videos of demonstrations usually done at my demo table. The fear of doing things I didn't feel comfortable with vanished, it had to be done, students needed to see their teacher making and to remain connected.

In the UK, routines improved as did student engagement. Email correspondence was overwhelming for both me and my students. Consequently, I set up WeChat class groups that proved successful. I messaged notifying I was ready for questions or to have a chat if they wanted, this developed into show-and-tell with students posting progress and peer feedback. Natural group leaders answered questions rather than me – the time difference meant this was important. Email traffic had overwhelmed many, leading some to switch off completely. Social media brought these students back, and has been my most successful initiative of online learning.

In the background, the newly named Covid-19 pandemic took hold around the world. Rumors of enforced Government quarantine and closed borders led to the professional decision to return to China. A few weeks later China closed her borders and cancelled visas for all foreigners.

On April 12th Beijing local authorities formally announced that from 27th April 2020, schools could begin to reopen beginning with Grade 12 students (18 years old) only in the first phase. This would be our graduating class of 2020. Two weeks later Grade 9 students (15 years old) would return. To enable this to happen all students and staff had to begin taking twice-daily temperature readings and monitor general health for the two weeks before campus re-opening. Admin and site staff began to prepare by following government regulations on safety. Many official visits took place over the two weeks to ensure all protocols regarding social distancing, class numbers (we were expecting 3 groups of 17 students and 6 support staff of TA's and teachers in each group). Each group had a dedicated signposted route into class indicating which corridors they could walk down, which bathrooms they could use, where they could sit in the classroom, where they could sit and eat at lunchtime, and routes out of campus are marked. Should an outbreak occur identification of contaminated areas could be quickly isolated and disinfected. As the date for return approached, all Beijing staff, working with Grade 12, had to attend training to familiarise ourselves with the procedure and protocols and take a nucleoid test to show we were virus-free.



BCIS body scanners

The BCIS mascot is a Warrior Horse, the student body is known as Warriors: the mascot greeted the grade 12 Warriors as they came through the body temperature scanners onto campus. At the end of each day, they were surveyed for feedback on their experience, and changes were made daily. Watching the grade 12s you could see how much they struggled with the social distancing rules and they spoke of their need for connection with their friends, face-to-face interaction, not online. We introduced inter-classroom Zoom meetings for social time and group games so that the whole year group could interact.

As school begins its phased reopening, we are transitioning into a new blended-learning model that will become our new norm including, synchronous and asynchronous classes. The mix of face-to-face and online 'classrooms' is a sign of hope that we are through the worst of it.



Grade 8's digital gallery

Beijing City International School is a not for profit Independent IB world school with 1,171 current students ages ranging from 2 – 18 from 28 different nationalities. Barbara Balmer is an Middle Years Programme (MYP) visual art teacher of Grade 6, 7, 8 and 10 in her first year of teaching at BCIS.