



# Online Class Act

After years of providing in-person art instruction, **Eric Wiegardt** tried teaching live on the internet—and extols its virtues.

by C.J. Kent

Vincent van Gogh famously remarked, “I am always doing what I cannot do yet in order to learn how to do it.” While it’s true that online learning may initially pose challenges for both instructors and students, many go on to discover

community and commitment in that virtual space. Eric Wiegardt had been teaching in-person art classes and workshops for more than 30 years, but when the pandemic moved everyone into isolation, he switched to online teaching. Having a fully supplied home

studio eased the transition, and his online students have been with him now for well over a year.

## ONLINE ADVANTAGES

Community-building is a development of online learning that few anticipated. Typically, people complain that the various video conferencing platforms feel distant and alienating. Wiegardt notes, however, that his online classes seem to offer a greater degree of camaraderie than a workshop, which he attributes to regular meetings over an extended time period. Every week for more than a year, students have logged into his 75-minute classes on Zoom. He limits enrollment to 20 students,

**OPPOSITE**  
When Eric Wiegardt teaches classes via Zoom, an overhead smartphone camera enables students to see him paint. The laptop screen allows him to see either the students or their work or a reference photo. Wiegardt also dons wireless AirPods, which include a microphone and filter out external noise. Large north-light windows provide natural light, and an overhead skylight (shaded in this photo) allows for further lighting adjustments.

PHOTO BY ANN MARIE WIEGARDT

so there’s plenty of opportunity for a general lesson, individual attention and a monthly critique of everyone’s work. Students can enroll in a month’s worth of classes or opt for a three-month subscription.

“The extended time frame allows me to share at a more advanced level than I’m able to do during in a four- or five-day workshop,” says Wiegardt. What’s more, the arrangement provides the consistency needed for students to develop their skills, and it makes regular and ongoing engagement possible, unlike typical short-term workshops. As the students get to know each other, they observe each other’s growth and encourage one another when struggling. “They celebrate each other’s success,” says Wiegardt, “whether it’s the completion of a strong painting or acceptance into a show or the sale of one of their works.”

## INSTRUCTOR INSIGHT

Having taught more than 5,500 students across the decades has provided Wiegardt familiarity with their challenges and misconceptions—and has given him insight on how to best help students overcome these difficulties. He points out that they need to recognize that “learning to be a good artist is not an overnight experience.” It requires perseverance, humility and acceptance of the bad days along with the good. Some students are beginners and others have been taking classes for a while, but these different levels don’t mitigate the fact that everyone is there to learn and improve.

As a teacher, Wiegardt knows the importance of patience and kindness. Students may reveal thinking patterns

or expectations that overshadow the accuracy of their perceptions. He remembers a student who was drawing a boat as if looking down on it, even though that view wasn’t what the reference photograph showed. He guides students to a realization of how their minds intervene and give them a false impression of what they’re observing. With this knowledge they can focus on what the eye actually sees.

## STUDENT NEEDS

Online learning does demand a particular set of personal strengths on the part of the students. Although the weekly sessions provide accountability, participants need sufficient self-motivation to paint alone between the classes in order to have a painting ready to present. Some students connect outside of class in order to bolster one another. Time management is also important because students need to submit images of their work in advance of class so that Wiegardt can prepare a line-up for critiques. A modicum of technical ability is also necessary. Class supply lists now include advice on camera placement and noise management. Wiegardt places his camera over his painting board so that students can always observe his work, and he encourages his students to establish a similar setup so he can shift his view quickly among their work during a class.

Working with a group of students over several months means Wiegardt can help them hone important foundational skills, such as basic composition. Even weeks after a lesson, he can revisit a teaching point or

principle when he sees students need the reinforcement. Ironically, students often arrive with what Wiegardt calls “a cluttered mind full of unnecessary compositional theories,” and he aims to help them unravel their attachment to theories that don’t serve the painting. Only time provides the space for such unlearning as the student adopts composition basics and, with practice and experience, adapts them productively. “Repetition is very important,” he says, as so many teachers know and students struggle to accept, but he adds, “There eventually comes a synthesis of knowledge and a growth in ability. It’s exciting to see.”

## LOOKING AHEAD

The close work with students made possible with online teaching has made Wiegardt reconsider the busy travel schedule he’d maintained before the pandemic. Not only was it personally exhausting, but it also lacked the important mentoring aspect that online learning permits—an aspect that he remembers and appreciates from his student days at the American Academy of Art, in Chicago. He feels that simply looking at art instructional manuals can be overwhelming—that students need specific information appropriate to their painting styles. The feedback and suggestions obtained through mentoring are transformational. “Then,” he says, “magic begins to happen in the student’s work.”

C.J. Kent, PhD is an assistant professor of visual culture and an arts writer. For more information about her work and services for artists, visit [ckent.art](http://ckent.art).

## MEET ERIC WIEGARDT

Watercolorist Eric Wiegardt has been awarded the Gold Medal and been named a Dolphin Fellow by the American Watercolor Society. He’s a respected art juror, and his work has appeared in museum exhibitions and other shows around the U.S. and in China. Over the years, his internationally popular workshops, Wiegardt’s Painterly Watercolors, have drawn thousands of students.

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