

Adjunct Faculty Learning Community Portfolio

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Jonathan Schnapp

College of Liberal Arts, Fine Arts

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Why I Teach

I teach for admittedly selfish reasons. No, it's not for the money or for any twisted sense of power. I teach because it makes me a better person.

In preparing lectures and activities, standing up in front of 40 strange new people and speaking, interacting with students, reading papers and grading, and every other part of teaching I face fears and challenge anxieties. I learn more about other people and make new friends and connections.

I also learn more about art and what it is to be an artist. Through preparatory research for classes, I have learned more about art history than I ever did as a student and I have strengthened my grasp of art theory. And by looking at historical artworks, I've gained many new insights into my own work as an artist as well as the motivation and inspiration to continue to create.

While there are many other reasons I will continue to pursue a career in education, such as the immense satisfaction to be had in helping others to learn and grow, these are ones that drive me back to the classroom each quarter.

Teaching Metaphor

After a careful examination of my goals as a teacher and for my class, my approach to teaching can best be described as that of a counselor or therapist.

This is a tricky metaphor because there are many connotations attached and I do not mean to imply that my students are suffering from serious mental health issues. Instead, my role as a teacher is to facilitate students in gaining more insight into themselves and the world around them.

A therapist studies psychology. He knows how the brain works and what kinds of mechanisms people develop to cope with the stresses and joys of daily life. However, a therapist doesn't necessarily spill out all this raw information to his client. Instead, the client does most of the talking. The client, with the help of the therapist, investigates his or her own reactions to situations to find what underlying issues or mechanisms are driving him or her. The therapist is only there to fill in the blanks with his knowledge and encourage his client toward further reflection so that a deeper level of knowledge and self-awareness may be gained. But each client has different goals and will reach them in his or her own way. The counselor is not there to force his clients into a mold.

Similarly, in my role as a teacher, I cannot make my students conform. I could spill out everything I know or think or feel about an artist or work of art but the students won't know what to do with that information. Should I spend hours raving about Picasso, that doesn't necessarily mean that the students in my class will automatically love Picasso. They may hate his works—even more so if they didn't care for him in the first place. I've always seen it as my job to get students to learn how to analyze their own responses to art. It's definitely okay to hate Picasso, but why? By elaborating upon these automatic responses of like and dislike the students can learn about themselves and only then can we begin to challenge these responses.

Teaching Project: Art Journaling

Introduction

"The only purpose for art is to have something pretty to look at on my cell phone or computer desktop." This line, written by one of the students in my Fine Arts: Visual Arts class (0505-213), is an apt summary of the mindset many students have when faced with the fine arts. It tells a disappointing and frustrating story: What is art? Something pretty. Decoration. Other than keeping the world from being a dull place, it's rather useless. Nothing of consequence and not much to think about.

In reality, the exact opposite is true. Throughout history, art has played major roles in politics, religion, and culture—not just as a passive commentator but as a driving force. Today, the presence of art in our daily lives is no longer centered upon the monolithic "artwork," the big painting or sculpture in a gallery space (though these forms still very much exist, they perform different and much less prominent roles than they once did), but is instead scattered in almost every part of our lives. Anywhere our eyes look has the potential to be art, regardless of whether we're looking at advertisements, television, web design, typography, automotive design, architecture, product packaging, graffiti, or fashion. They may not all be masterpieces and they may not have deep meanings behind them but they are all art and they all affect how we perceive and think about the world we live in. And they all rely on the principles, tricks, and secrets that visual artists have been developing for millenia.

The trouble is convincing students of this.

My understanding and ability to "appreciate" art comes from my own experiences as a student working towards a degree in the fine arts. These experiences consisted of studio classes, where I created works of art of my own, and art history classes, where I learned how art functioned and changed in connection with human society. Between the two, I gained a complex understanding of art and its principles. I learned how to make art, how to look at art, why we make art, and how art became what it is today. But in an Art Appreciation course, this dynamic of context and application that took me 8 years of study must be compressed and shrunk and pruned down into a single class.

Obviously, much is lost in the process. Most prominently, the studio aspect is nixed completely. Realizing this has reshaped how I think about teaching the Fine Arts: Visual Arts class as well as how I

approach teaching in general. The subject of this teaching project is a journaling assignment which is designed to reintroduce elements that are missing because of the lack of studio classes.

The Problem

Business majors and engineers have better things to do than spend hundred of dollars on art supplies or pull all-nighters painting furiously to have something to show in critique the next day. They don't register for this course because they wish to devote their lives to art. So it wouldn't be fair or feasible to include large amounts of studio work. However, this absence seriously undermines several of the goals of an Art Appreciation class.

The first is that of relevance. For artists-in-training, the terminology, trends, and historically important artists they are exposed to inspires and informs their own work. But for those who do not engage in the art making process there lacks any direct application of the course material. It becomes a tough sell convincing students that, yes indeed, this renaissance masterpiece that they have never seen before and likely never will again is very important.

The second important goal that is seriously hindered is that of visual literacy. It is necessary for students to be trained to understand what they see, to verbalize their experiences and construct meaning. Art students accomplish this through the critique process—grueling blocks of time, typically three hours, where all that is accomplished is looking at and talking about each others' works. Through this they learn the technical skills, terminology, and critical thinking skills necessary to understand and talk about images in a meaningful way.

In an art appreciation course, students must make steps towards visual literacy as well. It is a difficult proposition. They all know how to see already. They use their eyes every day and trust them without question. But in order to appreciate a work of art, the students must be coaxed into a new world of looking.

These issues, developing the critical thinking skills necessary for visual literacy and demonstrating relevance are my biggest concerns as a teacher of Art Appreciation. I believe a reflective journaling assignment, properly structured, can target both.

Review of Literature

These issues of relevancy and visual literacy seem lofty and difficult to accomplish, especially with something simple like journaling, but they are far from impossible to deal with and there are definite methods for achieving them.

There are many arguments supporting the use of journal writing. Hiemstra notes that a journal can be useful in many different situations for achieving many different types of goals, whether they are educational, professional, personal, scientific, psychological, or creative in nature (Hiemstra 2001, 20-23). He also lists many potential benefits from the act: enhancement of personal growth and an increased ability for self-discovery, development of problem solving skills, reduced stress, and stronger critical thinking skills (Hiemstra 2001, 24).

But among all of these options, my primary interest is the use of journal writing as reflective practice to enhance the learning process. As Boud describes, writing reflectively involves more than just documenting an experience as it happened. It questions the experience, explores feelings and reactions to it, challenges it, and attempts to make sense of it to create a deeper understanding. This is a "process of turning experience into learning (Boud 2001, 10)."

Journaling can accomplish this in ways that essays and research papers cannot because it is a form of Low Stakes Writing—a short, rough, and informal writing assignment that has little impact on a student's final grade. Without the pressure to perform, students can feel free to discuss the subject matter in their own way instead of trying to give the teacher what he or she wants. They can explore ideas without fearing failure (Elbow 1997, 7).

This journaling process has already been applied to the visual arts. Sanders-Bustle has written touchingly about her experience in using "Visual Artifact Journals" as part of her education classes. She notes that while many will use a sketchbook to experiment with and reflect upon art *created* by the writer, it can also be used to experiment with and reflect upon art *viewed* by the writer. By writing about what they see, students learn and apply art elements, principles, and terminology while simultaneously engaging in interpreting and assigning meanings to images—a skill necessary for the understanding of the arts (Sanders-Bustle 2008, 11).

This skill is often called "visual literacy." Peter Felten compellingly argues that, despite being

surrounded with images, we do not automatically have the ability to understand them (Felten 2008, 60). This becomes a definite concern as one realizes how saturated with images our culture has become and how much they they shape our perceptions. This prominence makes visual literacy an important and fundamental goal for education (Felten 2008, 63).

This is the first goal of my journaling assignment. By verbalizing what they see they engage in the same process that art students go through when they look at each others' work in a critique. Even if they may only begin by describing what an image looks like, with continued instruction, feedback, and more practice they will begin to access deeper levels of meaning in the image and make progress towards visual literacy.

The second goal, relevance, can easily be demonstrated through "authentic assessment." Svinicki explains that to be authentic, an assessment must be based on activities that require students to apply what they've learned to solve problems they might realistically encounter in the professional world. Students can see for themselves how lessons that might seem very theoretical and abstract within class are very real and applicable. They also gain a deeper understanding of the course material as they are put into situations where creative problem solving is needed when the learning activity calls for the students to use what they are learning in new and different ways (Svinicki 2004, 23-24).

This is a challenging concept to bring to an art appreciation class. The most authentic activity would seem to be for the students to make art themselves. However, this may actually be unauthentic in this situation because the students are not art majors and likely do not plan on becoming artists in the future. So finding an avenue for an authentic experience can be tricky. But if we focus our goal on visual literacy, not on training future artists, then the most authentic task is simply to have students practice their visual literacy skills with objects from their daily lives. This will allow students to see for themselves how the lessons in an art appreciation are transferable and relevant outside of the classroom.

Art Journaling

For the course, students will be required to purchase a blank, 9x12 (at the smallest) sketchbook in which all low stakes writing assignments and other creative activities in class will be

recorded, as well as any notes, questions, or anything else the students wish to include. This sketchbook will also be the center of this ongoing, quarter-long assignment art journaling assignment. This assignment will require students to write a journal entry, outside of class, about once a week (8 or more times during the quarter), though this number may be subject to fine tuning after seeing how students respond. Each entry should be a reflective response to an artwork or visual object they have encountered outside of class. This could be almost anything—a painting in an office or coffee shop, a mural, graffiti, a public sculpture, websites, advertisements, news photos, product packaging—the students may literally choose to write about anything they can see, although some objects will certainly be easier to write about than others.

There are few basic requirements for each journal entry. Each journal entry must include the date the object was encountered as well as its location. Also, the students must include a picture of the object. In certain cases, the object itself can be used, if it is something small, flat, and inconsequential, such as a magazine clipping or candy wrapper. This will provide a reference point for any future reflection the student may engage in and it will also assist in the reviewing and grading of the journals.

The remainder of the journal entries is up to the students' discretions, as long as they engage in some meaningful reflection on the object they have chosen. The students may choose to write about (but are not necessarily limited to) the following topics:

- 1) A personal response. How does the student feel about the object and why?
- 2) What is the intended message or meaning of the object? How does the student feel about this message?
- 3) A breakdown of the different visual elements at work in the object, such as line, shape, color, weight, space, and composition. How do these elements work together to serve the function of the object or create meaning within the object?
- 4) What visual elements work against the object's message?
- 5) What symbolism or metaphors are employed to support this?
- 6) Where is this object located? Does the object alter the space or the feeling of its environment?
- 7) If found in a news article, how does the object influence your perception of the article it was

connected to?

- 8) How might you alter this object to make it more appealing or useful?

The content and subject of these journal entries is intentionally left open ended and obtusely defined. A student does not have to look at a “proper” work of art at all for this assignment. In fact, the objects they choose may be rather banal. A journal entry could be inspired by something as simple as the student picking up her own pen and wondering why it looks the way it does. And while the design of a pen might seem to be outside the realm of an art appreciation class, this process of knowing how to look at what we see, questioning what we see, and constructing meaning from the experience can be transferred to a work of fine art. The difference is that students are now allowed to choose objects that reflect their own interests in design, culture, and communication. They can choose objects that are relevant to them instead of being forced to look at paintings they have little interest in. We live in a rich visual culture of which the visual arts is only a small part. Any amount of reflection on this culture is a step in the right direction.

The journals will be collected several times during the course—at least once at midterm and again at the end of the quarter for grading. The journal itself will count for a sizable percentage of the students' final grades (15 or 20%), however the entries themselves will not be scrutinized in detail. If the student displayed a good faith effort in assignment they full receive full credit. The students will not be judged on the quality or content of their arguments, writing ability, or recitation of factual information.

Variations

Because this is an assignment that allows for creativity, there are many options for fine-tuning. Small changes in the requirements could drastically alter students' motivation, inspire creativity, and create new challenges. Some possibilities include:

- 1) A topic or theme could be assigned for particular journal entries. This could be used for one or two entries during the course or for every entry. These topics would be vague and open-ended, challenging students to find something to fit and then explaining how their chosen

object fits the topic.

- 2) A specific object could be assigned for all students to examine. This would allow students the opportunity to compare and contrast their entries on a level playing field.
- 3) In-class presentations of journal entries might be required with several students randomly chosen to present each class period. This would encourage students' continued efforts with the assignment as they might be asked to present at any time.
- 4) An alternative to in-class presentations could utilize an online Course Management System, such as RIT's myCourses. Students could be required to post journal entries to a discussion board dedicated to that purpose and to respond to other students' posts.
- 5) A competition might be held at the end of the course for the most creative entry. For extra credit or other suitable award, the students would be motivated to put extra effort into decorating or experimenting with their journal entries. The winner would be chosen by class vote.
- 6) A more structured approach could be set up with one question being assigned for each entry. The questions would be arranged progressively to encourage students to think a little deeper every week.

Possible Issues

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing this assignment is that, without the need to perform to earn a grade, students may lack motivation and only put minimal effort into completing the assignment. They may see it as mere busy-work and write entry after entry without engaging their critical thinking skills (Mills 2008).

I have two strategies for countering this attitude. One, The assignment's methods and goals as well as some of the research supporting the assignment will all be outlined at the beginning of the course. This should hopefully defuse much of the students' feelings of confusion, apathy, or opposition as they will have a clear idea of why this has been assigned to them as well as how it fits into the larger goals of the course. The second strategy, simply put, is to make the assignment fun. By allowing students to choose objects they find personally interesting as well as by adding competitive,

gaming elements (such as the creative entry contest and themed entry challenge) will both aid in making the journal an endeavor that provides both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for students (Mills 2008).

Another potential issue stems from the need to assess and grade the journals. It has been noted that students may not write as openly when they know their journals will be looked at by someone else (Boud 2001, 15). To counter this, it may be necessary to create a system whereby students submit only several entries from their journal to be looked at. This could be as simple as using flags to mark which entries are acceptable to examine or it could be more elaborate, such as having students scan or photocopy some of their entries. Another possible solution would be to have the students create the criteria for assessment themselves as part of a class discussion.

A third issue stems from the sheer amount of writing that will be generated by this assignment. As an instructor, reading through any amount of journal entries to properly assess the work that has been done is a daunting task. However, it may not be necessary to read absolutely every single journal entry from every student. Checking to see that students are indeed writing is sometimes enough (McKeachie 2011, 216).

Conclusion

Journaling is an activity that is generally taken for granted. Yet it is a complex act that draws upon many different concepts—far too many to discuss here in any depth. Understanding how to effectively harness it as a teaching tool will take continued research and, most importantly, trial and error. Students reflections on the assignment will be an important measure of its success.

Unfortunately, a student journaling assignment will not solve the issues of demonstrating relevance and encouraging visual literacy skills by itself. While it is a definite step in the right direction, it must be accompanied by teaching strategies and class activities that reinforce its lessons and approach, otherwise students may dismiss it as being a silly and meaningless assignment simply tacked onto another lecture course. (This has been my experience with journaling assignments as a student.)

I have only scratched the surface with this project. There is so much more to learn about

teaching and my course content that I am almost scared to teach again. But I feel confident that the goals discussed here can be reached as long as I continue to push forward. I can do this.

Reflections on the Adjunct Faculty Learning Community

I originally approached the Adjunct Faculty Learning Community with mixed feelings. I am passionate about teaching, so I was very excited at the idea of developing my skills yet I was also quite nervous about what I was getting myself into. Being young, inexperienced, and an artist (we're all a bunch of weirdos), I feared I was in over my head.

I was very much relieved to find that the requirements were not as intense as I imagined. Nor were the other faculty members the scowling scarecrows from my nightmares. I found a friendly and relaxed environment and I looked forward to every meeting.

I am definitely disappointed that it is over. Most notably, I was saddened that I felt I didn't have much opportunity to connect with the other members as I would have liked. There wasn't much time for socializing or discussing our teaching projects and everyone seemed eager to get home afterward.

Still, I am very excited and energized from the experience. Through the readings and presentations and discussions I have had several revelations about art appreciation and I am now rethinking what its goals should be as well as how to effectively reach them. I am completely reworking the course (almost from scratch) to accommodate the new activities, discussions, and material. In addition to the journaling assignment, I will be bringing art supplies into class so that students may see and experience what they are instead of reading about them in a textbook. I am planning several small art projects for students to work on in class so that they may experience the creative process themselves. I am researching visual culture to find new avenues for making the material relevant.

My hope is that I will have the courage to follow through on these ideas and to keep learning and growing. I hope this for both my students and myself.

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