

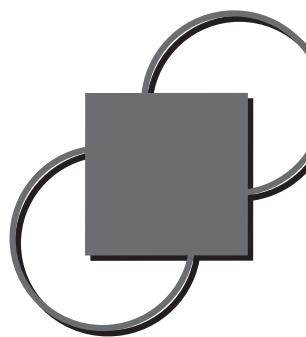


**7TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF
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A horizontal banner at the bottom of the page features a background image of a modern building's glass and steel structure, transitioning from blue on the left to red on the right. Overlaid on this image is the text "CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS" in large, bold, yellow sans-serif letters with a black outline.

SEVILLE (SPAIN)
17-19 NOVEMBER 2014



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DISCOVERY AND CREATION IN ART HISTORY CLASSES

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Abstract

This paper will outline the planning and implementation of assignments in History of Visual Arts classes, taught as part of a Higher Diploma in Visual Arts in Hong Kong. In this generation of post 90s students, concentration in class is becoming harder to maintain and an addiction to 'screens' that constantly deliver 'info-tainment' directly to an individual's mobile phone has created an expectation within students that is often at odds with traditional methods of teaching.

The challenge within an educational institution is to create activities that can fulfill the intended learning outcomes while at the same time presenting enjoyable and rewarding experiences that break down the students' preconceptions and expectations of a subject and actively engage their attention.

The paper will introduce my personal experiences of learning the history of art as a student, how dry and monotonous it seemed and how this part of learning seemed totally unconnected to my own art practice. I have grown to believe that an awareness of the history and development of art can positively inform the perception and attitude of a young artist. As a teacher responsible for the teaching of art history I became determined to find a way to teach Art History in a way that brought it to life and so practical projects were introduced into the teaching modules. The paper will go on to explain the reasons for the introduction of this style of pedagogy, how and why the assignments were created, how they were implemented and ultimately how the students responded to them.

Finally the paper will describe the fun the students had, the pleasure they obviously gained from the experience and how their final project led to an exhibition in a major local museum, which gifted the participating students a wonderful opportunity to exhibit their work in a public space.

Keywords: Art Education, Engagement activities, Post 90s generation

1 INTRODUCTION

Most of what I now know and understand of Art History I have taught myself since leaving art school and University. In a sense I became an autodidact, working my way through books and magazines, watching TV documentaries and videos borrowed from libraries. As an art student, I was required to attend lectures on Art History but I found it very difficult to concentrate, take in the information and retain it in my mind. However, I must say that this was not the fault of my Art History lecturer.

The lectures were, apparently, innovative although I was not aware of this at the time. Using two slide projectors the lecturer would juxtapose two images at a time, sometimes highlighting similarities, sometimes differences, and sometimes throwing together surprising combinations of images in order to provoke or stimulate discussion. Of course, it was impossible to remember everything that was said during the lecture so I would jot down a few names and later I would look them up in the college library. I was always on the lookout for artists whose work seemed to offer me something, something that I could feed back into my work. This seemed practical to me because actually I found it difficult to identify with those artists. They were already famous, that was why they were included in the books, and there seemed to be a huge gulf separating their careers and my own experience. Besides gaining a knowledge of the history of art for academic reasons or for purely pleasurable reasons, I couldn't see how it was going to help me develop as an artist.

Today, the problem of student concentration and motivation in class has only grown worse. The post 90s generation live most of their life looking at screens, either television or, increasingly more often,

computer or mobile phone screens. The habit of surfing the internet or flicking through scores of videos on sites such as YouTube.com has taught young people that information comes in short, lively packets and must be entertaining. It is natural then that the average attention span of young people has become shorter and what they regard as interesting or engaging has changed.

If we are to keep our students on task and hold their attention long enough for us to pass on valuable information we must constantly devise new ways to attract them in class. We cannot continue to rely on the accepted ways of teaching and we must constantly be looking for different ways to instruct and inform our students.

As a teacher I now aim to pass on my love and enjoyment of both making art and looking at works from art history. I constantly remind my students that for every piece of work they look at, no matter how old, there was a time in which it was regarded as contemporary, a current work of art. I agree with Charles Gorian who stated that he “refused to believe that knowledge and cultural production were limited to academic endeavors”. (Gorian, 1999)

Ultimately I am always searching for that magical moment, as described by (Taylor, 1992): “I coined the term ‘illuminating experience’ to describe both the initiating moment which takes the pupil from the outside to the inside of an art form, and all subsequent ones of a similar nature to which one can be subjected throughout life.”

2 A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING ART HISTORY

As a student in the late 70s, being taught in an educational system that was still heavily influenced by Modernism, I was introduced to the work and teachings of Josef Albers during my classes on colour theory and his ideology towards teaching art and design have stayed with me. Instead of requiring students to sit through endless lectures of theory and dogma, Albers immersed his students in various practical experiments so that they developed a feeling for what colour was and how colour worked. As he stated at the beginning of his seminal book ‘Interaction of Colour’: “The aim of such study is to develop – through experience – by trial and error – en eye for color’...’This book, therefore, does not follow an academic conception of ‘theory and practice.’ It reverses this order and places practice before theory, which, after all, is the conclusion of practice.” (Albers, 1963)

Albers felt that once students had taken time to experiment and play around with the colour exercises, they would more easily understand and take on board the colour theories that would be outlined later.

Alber's had previously studied at the bauhaus under the guidance of Johannes Itten, who had been allowed to develop the ‘Basic Course’ (or ‘Preliminary Course’, the *Vorkurs*) by the Head of the school at Weimar. This course, lasting one term (semester), was designed to initiate an individual response in students and to help them develop self-confidence. It also enabled the teachers to recognise the different talents possessed by the students so that they may help them find their personal vocation. This system was also later taken up in England within art schools and named the ‘Foundation Course’, which students studied prior to applying for a specific degree level course.

Ittens believed that “Respect for the human being is the beginning and end of all education” and aimed to assist each individual to find their own pathway, “Persons of different talents react quite differently to the means of expression and they accordingly develop along different paths.”, “I succeeded in opening up individual potentialities by adopting a certain way of teaching my students how to use the media of expression.” (Itten, 1963)

“It is not the means of expression and representation that count in art, but the individual in his identity and humanity. First comes the cultivation and creation of the individual; then the individual can create.” (Itten, 1970)

I am not the only student to have found difficulty in relating the study of art history to the studio practice, in fact “A long-standing problem in visual arts education was that art history teaching and studio practice were out of tandem; art college students still frequently fail to make essential connections between the two because it is still commonplace for them to be taught in different ways at different times by different tutors – it is not uncommon for the art historian to have no practical skills or interests, for example”. (Taylor, 1992)

2.1 Art History from an artist's perspective

I have been greatly impressed and inspired by the work of artist & teacher Charles Garoian. His struggle is so familiar to me as an artist/teacher searching for new ways to pass on my passion both for creating and studying art. Although Garoian employed performance as a vehicle for the transference of knowledge and experience, I could see clearly the potential positive benefits to be gained from introducing practical activities into what had previously been a purely academic experience for the students. The practical activities energised the students, concentrated their attention, boosted their self-confidence and cemented what they had learned into their cognitive memory. As he says "A young and idealistic artist and teacher, I wanted to prove...that teaching is an art form just as art is a form of teaching", "I brought my art-making inquiries to the classroom where I could straddle the border between the art of pedagogy and the pedagogy of art". "Although I could teach them historical assumptions about *form* in art, I had to rely on their contribution, the *content* of their cultural experiences to interpret, challenge, and transform art history into new cultural metaphors".(Garoian, 1999)

An idea arose one day and this was developed into assignments that could be incorporated into a *History of Visual Arts* teaching module. The concept of this idea was nick-named 'Learning by doing' for want of a better term. Instead of asking the students to conduct research and then write an essay that synthesised the information the students had gathered plus a personal conclusion, the idea was that this information could be communicated by reproducing it in physical, visual form rather than describing it in words. As Garoian explained "I taught art history in an unorthodox way, from the artists' perspective about art history, questioning its experiential character and relating historical myth to contemporary life and culture. In doing so, I aimed to bring history to life for my students". (Garoian, 1999) This was a revelation for me and it described exactly what I was trying to achieve. My students were studying visual arts and most of them dreamed of becoming an artist of some sort one day. I wanted to treat them like trainee artists in order to boost their self-confidence. Like Garoian I wanted the students to approach and analyse art works as artists, not as art historians or critics.

For this to work, there needed to be a vehicle that would provide the appropriate circumstances for the work. In fact there needed to be two vehicles, one for the individual project and another for the group project. The question we were asking was can the experience of recreating artworks help the students to appreciate and comprehend work in Art History?

The class must continue to teach the basic concepts of form, subject matter, content etc. and in order to fulfill the intended learning outcomes of the module, the students need to be able to recognise distinguishing characteristics of particular artists or works of art and to be able to begin to place them in a cultural context.

3 METHODOLOGY

The module assignments that were created needed to fulfill the required intended learning outcomes, which state that on completion of this module the students are expected to be able to: 1. Differentiate between major periods and movements in art history as a foundation for the development of an artist; 2. Analyse the characteristics of the art movements, periods or styles and the influence of society to nurture the students' own approach in art expression; and 3. Organise self-directed activities and compose them into unique presentations that express the characteristics of an art movement. The goal, therefore, was to create assignments / projects that can initiate the students' learning and stimulate enthusiasm for learning.

These days teaching involves steering students towards achieving a previously agreed set of intended learning outcomes. In Science subjects this is logical as there are many accepted theories and laws to confirm and demonstrate. Respected scientists have discovered and outlined these laws and it is necessary for the students to understand and be aware of them through replication of the standard experiments.

In the teaching of visual arts things are slightly different. If we think about the History of Art there have always been standardised approaches taken by academics, shared beliefs, accepted approaches etc. but occasionally a maverick historian or critic may present a vastly different or even revolutionary viewpoint. This maverick will usually have been educated in academia but will have later adopted a revolutionary viewpoint, totally at odds with what he/she has been taught.

If we now consider the teaching of Fine Art, the making of art by students who are practically speaking trainee artists, we need to look again at our methods. For the teaching of Art History, which this paper

is focusing on, I need to remember the personalities of my students and what their motivations are. Most of them dream of becoming artists in some form or another and so to teach a subject that can be very academic I need to relate what they are learning of the history of art with their art practice. They need to see or at least experience this linkage.

"Art history concerns what we know about artworks and views them primarily as sources of information." (Jansen, 1986), and it is this information that the students can feed back into their own practice.

Providing students with an introduction to the history of art is a requirement and so several lectures were prepared that could stimulate discussion. First it is important to consider what is and what isn't art. There are no strict answers for the students to memorise here, only questions for them to ask themselves. After that there would be an overview of the development of art, pausing over several chosen topics which could be regarded as important milestones, e.g. the Italian renaissance, the invention of oil paint, the Impressionists, and then moving onto a timeline of 20th Century art movements. The final phase would focus on the work of Chinese and local Hong Kong artists to emphasise that there is a connection between artists in the past and contemporary art.

As the practical assignments approach I would attempt to stimulate a personal response from the students and encourage them to begin selecting artists they felt an affinity with for whatever reason. Once they had an artist in mind, we would look at that artist's work and try to isolate the specific characteristics of the work, choice of subject, use of materials, techniques etc. It was found that the Google Art Project was particularly useful for this. It was possible for the students to zoom in on a piece of work and examine each individual brushstroke to understand how the work was made. We therefore made the transition from the theoretical to the practical approach.

In this way the students can be encouraged to take their established concepts of form, subject matter, content, and to add to those the elements line, colour, value, shape, texture and space that they had absorbed from their practical classes.

4 THE STUDENT WORK

The presentation day for the first part of the module, the artist's house project, finally arrived and as the students entered the room, they placed the houses along the first 3 rows of tables in the large classroom. There was a notable 'buzz' of excitement in the air so the students were first asked to spend some time to look at each other's projects. This is the time to wander around with the students and talk to them in small groups as they comment on the work and take photographs of work they particularly like.

After everyone had taken the opportunity to inspect the work, an overall critique of the work was conducted, commenting positively on a selected piece of work for one reason and then another piece of work for a different reason. One example may successfully demonstrate the mood or atmosphere of the chosen subject artist, another one may correctly illustrate the noted brushwork that signifies the artist's technical approach. During this critique it is important not to highlight faults or draw attention to work that failed to correctly embody the chosen artist's oeuvre. This kind of criticism will come later as the projects are reviewed with the students in a one-on-one session. The critique is meant to reinforce a student's confidence and to praise good work, not to humiliate or embarrass a particular student.

The students had chosen a very diverse range of artists to design for. Some were household names from European art history such as Claude Monet, "Fig. 1", which featured a model of Monet's garden at Giverny in France complete with Japanese-style bridge and weeping willow trees. Even the base of this house had been painted in an impressionistic manner thereby completing the overall feel of the work.



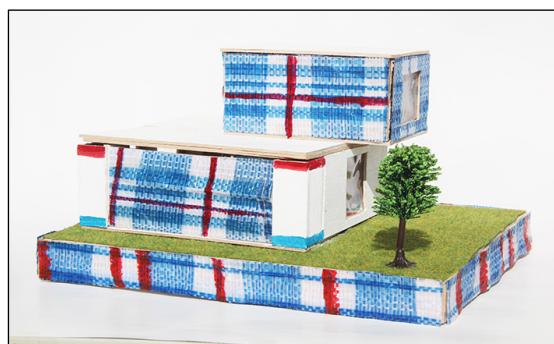
"Fig. 1". Chosen artist: Claude Monet

Another student chose the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki "Fig. 2", and created a house using air-drying clay and natural materials that appeared to have been taken straight out of one of Miyazaki's feature-length animations. This was a delightful piece of work and communicated the student's attention to detail and genuine admiration for the artist's work.



"Fig. 2". Chosen artist: Hayao Miyazaki

To take another example, this time from closer to home. One student chose local artist Stanley Wong, A.K.A. Anothermountainman as the artist they would design a house for. "Fig. 3". Stanley Wong is a local designer, photographer, artist and curator and the student cleverly chose the distinctive red, blue and white plastic fabric often used by the artist in his artworks and installations. This fabric is most often seen being used as the ubiquitous large carry bags favoured by domestic helpers in Hong Kong. The balance between the artist's modernist ethic alongside a sensitivity to local materials and culture is clearly demonstrated in the student's work.



"Fig. 3". Chosen artist: Stanley Wong (Anothermountainman)

5 MUSEUM COLLABORATION

The results of this project were surprising and much better than expected. The pleasure the students had gained from working on the project was clear to see and it had successfully motivated them to approach the study of art history in a much more positive way. One important observation was that each student felt that they had made personal discoveries and had not simply been led by the teacher towards the pre-ordained intended learning outcomes. As the teacher I also gained a great deal of satisfaction acting as the facilitator for my students' learning. We had spent the semester working together. I may have set the project and broadcast the guidelines, but we had made the journey together.

Josef Albers considered his students as "collaborators" and states at the end of his book "...I should like to state that my students in color have taught me more color than have books about color". (Albers, 1963)

Albers also reminds us that " In the end teaching is a matter not of method but of heart. Therefore, the most decisive factor is the teacher's personality." ..."good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers." (Albers, 1963)

In part 2 of this module the students took the small houses as a starting point and after forming groups of 5 or 6 members they joined forces and created larger art pieces that reflected a particular art style or movement from history. The physical appearance of the final work was intended to be based upon the concept of a 'sit-able' object and was planned to coincide with a major exhibition of rare and historic chairs in a prominent local museum. The museum staff made several visits to the classroom during the construction phase and everyone was overjoyed with the results. In the end due to limited space, three of the student projects were chosen for the final inclusion in the exhibition.

One group chose the Italian art movement *Arte Povera* to recreate and they had a sub-story which they named 'The Last tree'. This work was a commentary on how trees have been cut down for paper production, especially newspapers which are a throw-away medium. They created a work that showed the transition from a newspaper stack, growing back into the natural tree that had initially provided the paper. The paper stack could be opened for use as a sit-able object and stored reading material, also made from paper. "Fig. 4".



"Fig. 4". Chosen movement: Arte Povera

A second group chose the *Gothic* style in art and architecture but decided to emphasise the style's links to the forms and shapes found in nature by using found, natural materials to create their sit-able object. "Fig. 5".



"Fig. 5". Chosen movement: Gothic Style

A third group chose the topic of Neo-Pop, which could be said to include the work of artists such as Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons. Their sit-able object comprised 4 wooden blocks, each of which could be used to sit on. The form of the work was playful and appeared to invite the audience to interact with the work, especially on the plain black cube with accompanying coloured chalk. "Fig. 6".



"Fig. 6". Chosen Movement: Neo-Pop

In the museum, alongside the main historical section of the large exhibition, my students' work was displayed on the first floor level on a purpose-built podium and we all had great fun installing the work. This was another extra experience for the students. They were able to witness how these exhibitions are put together and they could see first-hand how much unseen work goes on prior to the opening day.

On the evening of the opening party their were many positive comments and my students visibly grew in confidence. Another unexpected experience for the students was that of an exhibition participant rather than as part of the audience. They were thrilled to see visitors inspecting and photographing their work. The decision to use this pedagogical method seemed to have been successful. The students were highly motivated, wished to learn more, had gained great confidence and had made the connection between art history and art practice.

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