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Insights from Art and Design Writing Workshops

Rebecca Diederichs and Carrienne Leung

Kathleen Blake Yancey asserts that the first-year essay be more gateway than gatekeeping. Through facilitated workshops, the Writing and Learning Centre at OCAD University introduced first-year students to research and writing strategies to address specific learning objectives of their art and design history research essay. Students were encouraged to think critically about their own authorial intention, context, perception, and to reflect upon their processes of writing and studio practice beyond the university and towards art and design professional communities. We trace the genealogy of these workshops via insights gathered from WLC staff, faculty and student participants.

The first-year essay, as Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) states, has been one of the stalwarts of academic gatekeeping. The assignment immediately sets and signifies for students that there are conventions and standards to the institution that they have been admitted. Not only does the first-year essay count as an academic exercise, many students interpret this emotionally charged experience and their grade as a sieve through which they are sifted to determine if they can “truly” cut it here. In her essay, Yancey (2004) calls for a shift for this assignment to function as less gatekeeping and more as gateway for students to build skills to participate in the writing and reading public they are joining. For students in a visual art and design institution like OCAD University, this gateway signifies an introduction to particular discourse communities as well as ways of seeing, thinking and making knowledge using writing as a medium.

This chapter details the process of developing and revising a writing workshop to support the first-year research paper. At the Writing and Learning Centre (WLC), our unique position as co-curricular support places our services at the so-called “gate”, and we are invested in supporting students in acquiring the skills needed to complete and thrive within their programs. By planning and delivering workshops intended to assist students with their first-year research paper, we recognized that the WLC needed to encourage a wider-ranging and particular thinking about these kinds of assignments that would contribute to their work across practices or disciplines.

Our insights, gathered across several years, are based on feedback and observations from students, facilitators and staff as well as our own assessment of strategies for facilitating the workshops. We came to realize the importance of engaging with

writing as a process of *making* and how we might encourage and support students to approach writing assignments as they might their studio-based projects. How could we present writing approaches as students might explore materials and methods for creative production?

Two strategies emerged: the role of intuition and the use of metaphor in the process of writing, research and critical thinking. These were not deliberately considered as such but with the evolution of the workshop, they became significant ways to demonstrate how writing about art and design correlates to the process(es) of art and design creation and production. In developing a workshop for the first-year research essay attached to the mandatory foundations course on art and design history, the WLC has had to continually evolve our thinking about the process of writing as making as well and integrate this kind of process back into our workshop design. The workshops, therefore, required “tactile” material-based approaches to writing and model a writing process that has the intuitive exploratory elements of the studio (Figure 1).

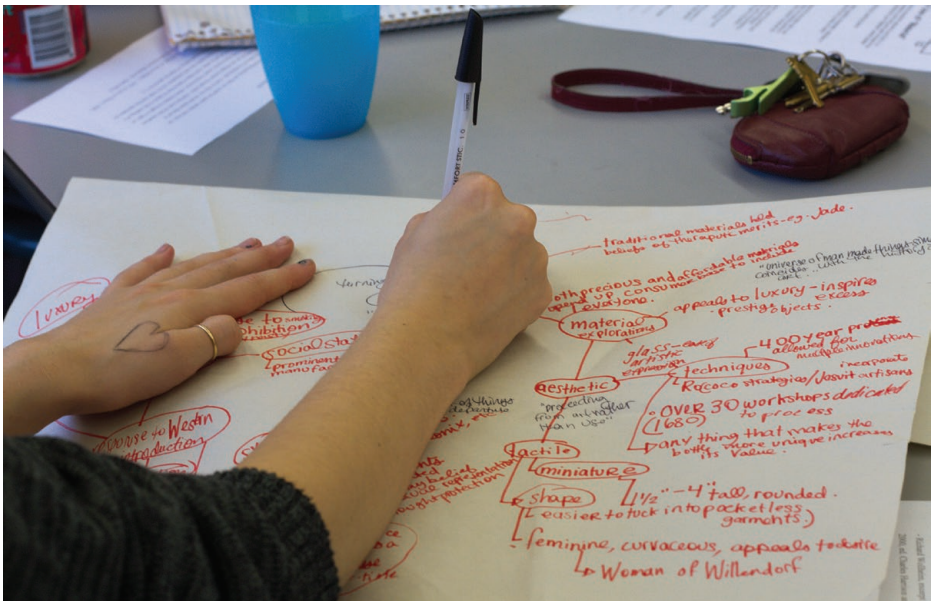


Figure 7.1. Student idea-mapping during WLC Workshop supporting VISC 1001/1002 (photo courtesy of Angie Roberts).

The Assignment

The WLC offered the first iteration of the writing workshop during the fall term of 2011, to provide first-year students with strategies to succeed with a “critical anal-

ysis and research” essay assignment. This assignment was attached to a mandatory survey course on art and design history for all first-year students.

The assignment objectives required students to choose an art or design object on physical display at either the Art Gallery of Ontario or the Royal Ontario Museum (both Toronto); use one of four or five assigned art critique text excerpts to analyze the object; conduct and provide research that supports their thesis statement (which should link object and text). The paper was to be 1,000 words, and students were required to cite three research sources. With only recent exposure to analytical observation of an object and little or no experience critically evaluating a piece of art writing or art criticism, they either ignored or only superficially made use of the text excerpt. Most significantly they found it difficult to see this essay assignment as anything other than a grading device, as gatekeeper. Our biggest challenge then was in helping students see it as a way to gain insight into their own writing and making process(es) through the evaluation and research of objects from ancient to contemporary histories.

The Role of Intuitive Exploration

In the first iteration of the workshop, we provided a two-hour session. The first hour focused on the writing process: free-writing, idea generation, focused writing, note-taking and integration of sources, acknowledgment and citations of sources guided by a slide presentation. The second half of the workshop entailed breakout groups working with a facilitator to work through parts of the assignment with sample texts and images of art/design.

The two challenges that students shared were first, the disconnect between the “instructional” portion of the workshop with the “doing” portion. The length of the slide presentation meant that when we finally invited students into groups, information needed to be repeated and the students had some difficulty comprehending the strategies we had described. Second, while these were all valuable tools and discussion points, students indicated that they hoped the workshop would more directly address the specific assignment and not focus on skills.

This first iteration of the workshop alerted us to the assumptions that students make in writing a research essay. Instead of trusting their first instincts as a way to inquiry, many felt they needed to take a formal, “academic” approach without an understanding of what this means or involves. By introducing the role of intuition as a way to assess the subject, students build the confidence to begin to develop pathways to research and knowledge. Intuitive response, often used in studio practice, allows students to bring in their personal reflection and context. When metaphor and intuition are seen and employed as part of research and analysis of visual culture, students begin to consider their agency as critical thinkers, as designers, makers and writers.

From the collective feedback and workshop “debrief,” we learned that the group work was the most effective part. Facilitators worked with objects (even if only in documentation-form) and encouraged students to relax around the rigid formulaic approach to writing a research essay. They now wrote down many notes, questions, observations about both the text and the object, then assembled these on the board to be arranged thematically. Because the total group size varied from five to 18 participants, this meant greater engagement, discussion and collaboration between student participants and peer facilitators (Figure 2). Students continued to focus on applying strategies to a physical object. They were also given enough time to work together to unpack a sample text excerpt followed by application of those strategies to analysis of the object. Peer facilitators and students alike were encouraged to acknowledge associations, revelations, and especially observations that seemed overly obvious or intuitive—and to use these to identify and propose deeper more complex and nuanced ideas/concepts in the text and in the art object, and sometimes identify possible thesis claims and/or hypotheses (Figure 7.3).

We realized more clearly that considering an object both methodically and intuitively could be correlated to the processes of brainstorming, sketching, and experimenting in the studio: it became both a visual exercise and one of rearranging and organizing ideas as one might organize and consider components in developing ideas for an art or design project. Inviting students to consider their own *making* processes in light of conceptual and material decisions they observed in these art and design works became paramount. We felt that if students could see this connection, the essay assignment could form a gateway to thinking and making.



Figure 7.2. Students working together during WLC Workshop supporting VISC 1001/1002 (photo courtesy of Angie Roberts).

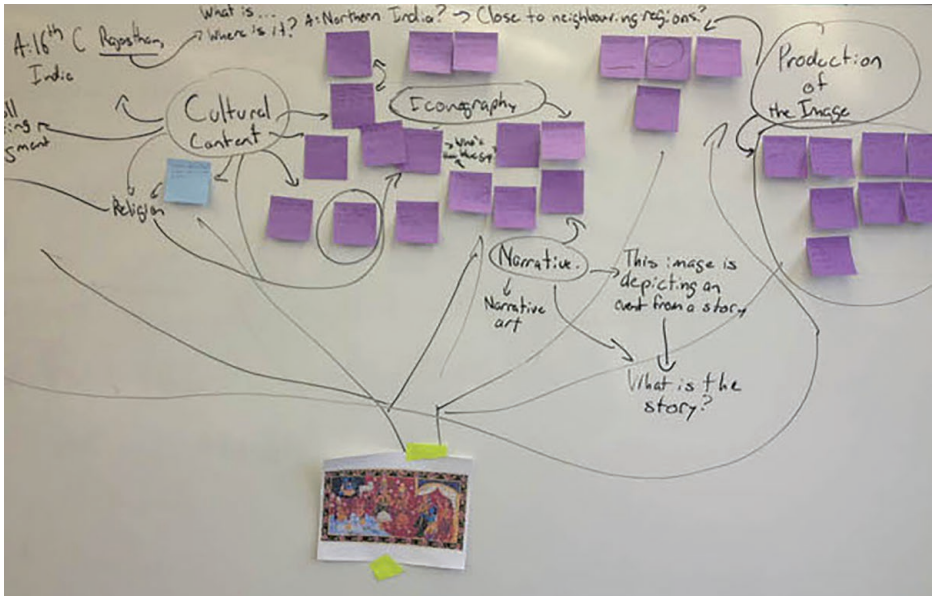


Figure 7.3. Idea map created by students during WLC Workshop supporting VISC 1001/1002 (photo courtesy of Angie Roberts).

In the last couple of years, the assignment changed and no longer requires a response to a text excerpt. A theme (ritual, awe, luxury, etc.) now frames the essay along with the choice of a question that directs research as well as thesis. Because of this change we now ask students to propose a theme that comes to mind when observing a physical object (on display for the workshop) (Figures 7.4 and 7.5).



Figures 7.4 and 7.5. Views of the object used in VISC workshops (photo by Rebecca Diederichs).

They free-write/ink-shed focusing on observation of the object, its materials, construction, method, etc. A second free-write responds to one of the themes suggested with attention to authorial intention, aesthetic and conceptual decisions. By doing this, students practice strategies of *looking*, *note-making*, and *analytical observation* in preparation for the assignment (Figure 7.6, Figure 7.7).

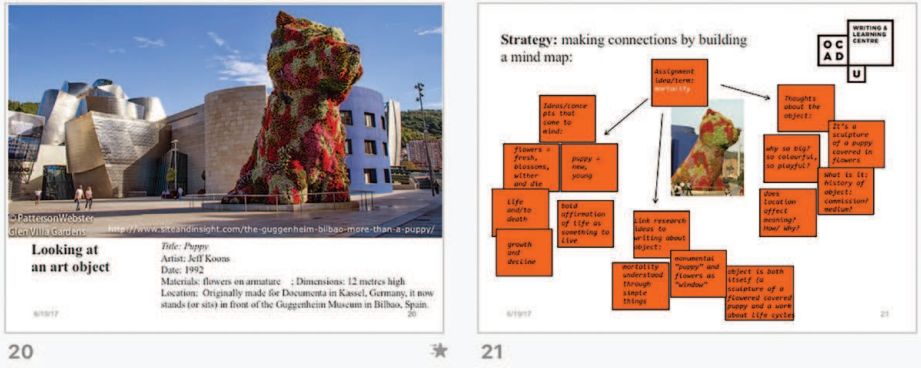


Figure 7.6. Slides from workshop presentation: Writing, Research Workshop for VISC 1001/1002 (photo courtesy of Angie Roberts).



Figure 7.7. Concept mapping with sticky notes, WLC Workshop supporting VISC 1001/1002 (photo courtesy of Angie Roberts).

Considering Visual Language and the Role of Metaphor

The use of metaphor gives us a range of ways to access understanding and meaning, especially in the context of an institution focused on visual culture. Often a “seat-of-the-pants,” spontaneous and possibly intuitive problem-solving method, it usually results in students’ grasping the idea more effectively. In her poem, “Essay on what I think about most,” Anne Carson (2001) quotes Aristotle on the value of metaphor: “. . . it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new and fresh” [*Rhet.*, 1410b10-13]. Orr, Blythman, and Mullin (2008) propose that educators “mindfully shape visual metaphors for students so that the visuality and plasticity of language becomes apparent to them.” In the first iteration of the assignment, students were required to respond to a text excerpted from a longer theoretical text. Many students felt that they needed to read the entire text as part of the process to understand the excerpt. Their essays were bogged down by the summary of the text and left little essay space to apply it to their chosen object and integrate research sources into a discussion. We witnessed this in our role as tutors and in the workshop suggested that the excerpt, in itself, become *the lens through which they might view an object*. The thoughts articulated in the short excerpt could function then as a way to zoom in or adjust their perspective on and about the art or design piece.

When we discuss the integration of their research sources, we use the metaphor of a *potluck dinner* in which the student could invite a number of people to join them at their table: their reader, the artist/designer, the object itself and the authors of the resources they include. At such an event, they would receive and acknowledge the satisfying and/or unexpected ways that different contributions work together. Similarly, we describe the evolution of a thesis statement, especially at early stages of writing, as *a scientist’s preliminary hypothesis*. In this way students connect to processes of experimentation, to trial and error, assessment of findings and conclusions and refinement to a more directed (if necessary) thesis.

Ongoing Evaluations and Revisions

The use and demonstration of metaphor and the spotlight on intuitive responses to visual art and design objects continue to be our focus as we facilitate these workshops. In the last two years of program delivery, we’ve witnessed much more engaged and active discussions about how art and design contribute, reveal, interact with both our immediate communities as well as extending to broader society and culture.

The following considerations have therefore become critical aspects of the workshops and continue to inform their evolution:

- Demonstrate that *writing is a process of making* akin to studio processes, i.e., through the language of metaphors employing artistic considerations (lens, frame, etc.).
- Encourage *writing at a university of art and design as an inventive possibility* rather than a prescribed form: a translation of and dialogue between a visual/physical/tangible language into textual language (text to text).
- Acknowledge *intuitive response to objects under scrutiny*: encourage students to listen to their emotional and intellectual reactions *before* they filter them through their understanding of academic expectations. A consideration of the space for these reactions and queries flows into critical thinking as *students tap into what they know, experience, and believe about their world*.
- Facilitate students' thinking and critique of authorial intention, context, perception and reception in ways that are intended to help them reflect upon their own processes of writing and studio and extend towards communication with and to the community beyond the university (Figure 7.8).

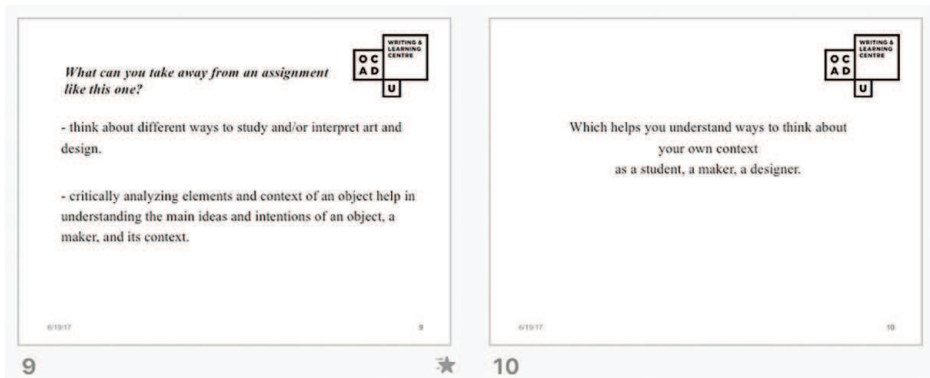


Figure 7.8. Slides from workshop presentation: *Writing, Research Workshop for VISC 1001/1002.*

Through five years of iterations, the priorities of these writing workshops continue to be to support students' intuitive engagement with visual culture, practice research as an organic as well as an organized activity, formulate questions about materials, formal elements, contexts, authorship, presentation, representation, etc. As participants in the world, students need to consider "how what they are composing relates to 'real world' genres" (Yancey, 2004). We intend that these writing workshops encourage them to access what they know, what they see, how they read. In this way, students see and think critically about their contributions to visual culture as they interact *in the real world*.

References

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