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Abstract

This article informs about a multidisciplinary learning community targeting first year students from diverse cultural backgrounds at an urban community college. The combination of English, art, and philosophy of art in a *Creativity Cluster* offers an excellent opportunity for great teaching and learning experiences. Yet, how can faculty address the multiple challenges faced by inexperienced student readers who have little time to reflect on difficult texts or make thoughtful connections across disciplines? The authors find that students' reading comprehension can be deepened and reinforced by dovetailing such manifold sources as poetry, short stories, plays, film, music, artworks, and readings in aesthetic theory. Further, students' critical thinking and analytical writing skills can be improved with related creative activities and integrative paper assignments. Moreover, through improvised activities, faculty can respond effectively to students' needs, nurture their creativity, and enable them to make meaningful connections across disciplines and artforms.

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Keywords

aesthetic education, creativity, integrative learning, multidisciplinary reading, improvised activities

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"How much do they get for that?" asks one student about a Piet Mondrian painting, all colorful boxes and jazzy angles. He's amazed at the prices a Mondrian might command in today's art market and obviously skeptical of the value of a painting about which he says, "I could do that myself." At the start of the semester, we philosophy and English professors are showing our *Creativity Cluster* students a series of Mondrians to get their initial reactions before providing any aesthetic background or guidelines for "how to read" these works. At this student's response, we catch each other's eye and decide to have our students engage in a hands-on activity: "Let's all make our own Mondrian." Once papers, crayons and colored pencils have been distributed, students set to work. Even the student who had looked askance at the Mondrian is busily creating his masterpiece. Next, we turn this into an on-the-spot informal writing assignment: "Once you've finished your 'Mondrian,' pretend you're offering it for sale. Write a promotional blurb elucidating what makes this an authentic Mondrian deserving of top dollar." Thus, students are learning to "read" Mondrian's artistic idiom while utilizing his visual vocabulary to produce their own work. Our goal is to motivate students to see themselves as creative in the sense emphasized repeatedly by the artist Joseph Beuys, "Everyone is an artist" (Zumdick, 2002, p. 12). "Being Mondrian" seems to achieve this objective since they all "like" their own Mondrian and admire or critique each others' artwork at the end of the activity with remarks like "that's so Mondrian" or "Mondrian would've used blue here." Moreover, in stylistically mimicking a Mondrian and evaluating the merits of their "Mondrian," students are now engaged in active reading, critical thinking, and analytical writing, all skills we aim to nurture through our cluster.

What does it mean to "read" a painting, a poem, or a philosopher? Reading these kinds of texts often poses a great challenge for first year students taking the *Creativity Cluster* at LaGuardia, CUNY, an urban community college in western Queens, New York City, with students from more than 150 countries. For our cluster's students, up to a quarter of whom are non-native English speakers, a philosopher's thorny style and their own unfamiliarity with cultural references or allusions tend to impede their understanding of the readings. Moreover, many of our students are from low-income families and so must work part- or full-time jobs in addition to taking the cluster's full-time course load. They have little reflective time to assimilate the readings, let alone make thoughtful connections among them. With scant or no previous arts education and no time to visit museums, most are inexperienced when it comes to "reading" a painting, play, film, or piece of music. The courses they take together in the cluster—*English Composition I*, *The Research Paper*, the aesthetics course *Philosophy of Art*, and the visual art course *Art and Society*—will help them gain that experience.

In the cluster, students explore such questions as: What is creativity? Who is creative? Why do we create? What do we create? Why is creativity important in

our lives? The cluster's three professors spend additional time during the week planning integrative assignments. Further, as the philosophy and English professors, we co-teach the final instructional hour of the week, using this time for activities, field trips to museums, and other experiences to help students comprehend and discover connections among the cluster's challenging texts. In this team-taught hour, we often find ourselves improvising like good jazz musicians while responding to students' questions or comments, and then designing impromptu experiences that enhance their understanding. In turn, when students observe their professors engaging in spontaneous design, they start to imitate this creative process.

Improvisation frequently brings about peak teaching and learning experiences wherein we use the elements of who we are, our knowledge of our fields, and our experience and expertise. We are like the musician who draws upon her deep-seated knowledge of the tune, rhythm, and harmony; technical proficiency in playing or singing; listening skills; and experience of ensemble playing to "go with the flow" of the moment. As instructors, we have found that "planning an agenda of learning without knowing who is going to be there, what their strengths and weaknesses are, how they interact, prevents surprises and prevents learning. The teacher's art is to connect, in real time, the living bodies of the students with the living body of the knowledge" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 20).

Early in the semester, we contemplate how we can give a contemporary edge to a classic reading like Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. We plan for students to enter their *Philosophy of Art* class in the dark. The lights are turned off, their chairs are arranged in rows, and they see a flickering arbitrary news video on the screen in front of them. The teacher remains silent. Confused, the students wonder, "What's happening?" It takes a few minutes until one of them shouts out, "Wow, I get it—it's Plato's cave!" The others begin to figure out the connection to the assigned reading. The philosophy professor then guides them into this modern version of Plato's thought experiment: "Let's assume all of us have been chained in this position, and all we ever see are the videos from the projector." Students easily imagine how limited our perspective would be in this situation. Next, the instructor asks them to conjecture about what it would be like for a classmate who has been released into the outside world. Eagerly applying all further stages of Plato's cave to their thought experiment, they picture the student leaving the classroom and exploring the college, venturing into the outside world and seeing the daylight, and being received with hostility upon her return by those who are still in the classroom mesmerized by the videos on the screen, akin to Plato's shadows. They appreciate that Plato is describing creatively the path of learning. They become aware that a teacher can only loosen the chains, but that ultimately they have to make the demanding journey from the shadows of shallow

opinions to the sunlit realm of true knowledge. Excited that they have understood Plato, they are abuzz as they enter the room for their English class to discuss the day's reading, "London" by William Blake. With the English professor's help while exploring Blake's phrase "mind forged manacles," students perceive parallels between the ideas of Plato's allegory and those expressed by the poet. Dovetailing Plato with Blake enables students to discover connections and thereby gain "the intellectual benefits" of "exposure to a number of disciplinary perspectives" (Van Slyck, 2006, p. 167).

The first time we taught the *Creativity Cluster*, we realized how much students are in need of cultural background to understand not only works of art but also their philosophy and English class readings. We had dovetailed our readings so that eventually students could write about the resonances between James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" and a philosophical essay by Robert Kraut (2005/2011) that questions whether music, specifically jazz, is a form of language. We thought that our students would easily see how these two readings inform one another. However, they had trouble understanding Kraut's point because most of them had virtually no familiarity with jazz and therefore no examples in mind for contextualizing the philosopher's ideas. Conferring just before that week's team-taught period, we decided to show video performances by Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and others, at first pointing out instances of "conversation" between individual musicians until students picked up on other examples. In the next English class, students closely re-read the last scene in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," wherein Sonny plays jazz piano in an ensemble at a nightclub. Students could then see that Baldwin underscores the performers' musical rapport with one another as dialogic. In our integrative paper assignment applying the philosopher's ideas to Baldwin's short story, one student wrote:

> In this passage, the author uses personification to illustrate the conversational nature of the music. By using verbs such as "insisted," "commenting," and others, Baldwin shows us how the jazz musicians are able to wordlessly converse with one another through their instruments. The notes, the chords, the rhythms, and the keys are the components of this conversation. They are the components of jazz language in the same way that words and sentences are the components of a spoken language such as English or French.

For our students to succeed in reading challenging texts, they must be able to identify their own comprehension gaps and be motivated to research unfamiliar references and allusions. We wonder how to make this process exciting and spontaneous as students read excerpts from Vasily Kandinsky's "Reminiscences" in the cluster's English course. Lacking sufficient cultural background, they are

unprepared to comprehend what Kandinsky is saying, for example, about the impact of Monet's *Haystacks* on his own work or how he tries to emulate visually the rich musical textures heard in Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The English professor divides the class into small groups, directing them to skim the reading and make a list of the "unknowns," including, among other allusions, Monet, Rembrandt, the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Richard Wagner, a Moscow sunset, and a Russian peasant home's interior. Next, through research, each group becomes the "expert" on one of Kandinsky's references. Extending this activity into the team-taught period, we ask the groups to create PowerPoint presentations to show the class their findings. Through this activity, students also learn what it takes to understand a reading. We then look at various Kandinsky paintings, asking students to note how the experiences described in "Reminiscences" play out in his works of art. In the ensuing discussion, one student notices how "bright" many of Kandinsky's colors are, "like the painted furniture we saw in the Russian house." With this wider lens, students view Kandinsky's paintings through the cultural context in which they were created, thus complementing the focus of their *Art and Society* course. Simultaneously, in their philosophy class they read Clive Bell (1914/2011) on the aesthetic value of "significant form" in a painting's assemblage of colors and lines (p.18-19), an otherwise abstract concept that now comes to life for our students since they can *see* Kandinsky's composition with an informed eye. Next, in a short integrative English and philosophy essay, students write a detailed description of a Kandinsky painting and their response to its "significant form." One student points out that, at first glance, "the triangles, circles and lines" in Kandinsky's *Arch and Point* "appear to be no more than an arbitrary conglomeration of shapes," but he then sees that "together they evoke this aesthetic emotion that defines significant form."

The cluster's context of interrelated philosophy and English readings enables students to grasp sophisticated concepts. In their English course, students read and discuss William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The play meanwhile serves as an example through which they can understand Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Further, when they read in philosophy about Nietzsche's concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, they can see that Hamlet embodies both the contemplative and temperate Apollonian side as he deliberates and then refrains from killing the praying Claudius and the unrestrained Dionysian character when he wildly slashes through the curtain unwittingly stabbing Polonius. Additionally, philosophical theories of fictional truth and the "puzzle of fiction" make sense for students as they ponder why they feel genuine empathy with the character Hamlet while they are at the same time aware that this person does not even exist. The play helps students comprehend their philosophy readings while the discipline of philosophy, in turn, adds new perspectives on the play.

Next, our students view scenes from Olivier's *Hamlet* as their English instructor, a former professional musician, focuses their attention on the effect of the film's powerful musical score. In preparation, they read a philosophy essay by Stephen Davies (2006/2011) on the emotional power of music. However, they are unfamiliar with the classical pieces of music to which Davies alludes and therefore do not understand his thesis. Addressing this challenge, we play recordings of these pieces, works to which Davies claims listeners respond with the same emotions. We ask students to jot down adjectives to describe how the music feels. They are silent and contemplative as they listen to the slow movement of Gustav Mahler's fifth symphony. After listening to this selection, we ask our students to share their descriptive words. One of the professors writes their responses on the board: "sad," "mournful," "depressed," "sorrowful," "gloomy," showing uncanny concurrence in the emotional valence of their chosen words, thus illustrating Davies' point. The activity we have devised for the Davies reading pays off as students now realize and can adroitly articulate how William Walton's music for *Hamlet* emphasizes the film director Olivier's intentions, amplifying the depicted emotions. Regarding Hamlet's "unweeded garden" soliloquy in the first act's second scene, one student notes:

> We see how he [Hamlet] descends into depression and anger as he thinks over his mother's marriage to his uncle after his father's demise. The piece of music that is played … is dark, slow tempo and low-pitched bass as Hamlet is slouching in his chair.

By now in their art class, they have learned some of the compositional strategies used by artists. So at this stage, they are able to view a scene from *Hamlet* in detail, analyzing each frame compositionally. Their parallel reading in philosophy, Noël Carroll's (1985/2011) "The Power of Movies," helps them understand how various camera techniques render the scene so potent. While watching select scenes during class, students identify these techniques, bursting out with "is this indexing?" or "that's scaling." Viewing specific scenes through the critical lens of the philosophy reading gives students a deeper understanding of both Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Olivier's film, as one student demonstrates in our integrative English and philosophy paper assignment:

> "Bracketing has an inclusionary dimension, indicating that what is inside the frame or bracket is important" (Carroll 92), and this method achieves just that. For instance, when the gravedigger reenters the frame from in the grave at the right of Hamlet's shadow, it seems to suggest that perhaps not too far from now will he be digging a grave for the Prince of Denmark himself.

Exploring the theme of creativity across art forms, we prepare students for a final culminating project by reading Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "Der Erlkönig" ("The Erlking") and playing YouTube performances of three different musical versions it inspired: Franz Schubert's song of the same title, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst's "Grand Caprice on Schubert's 'Der Erlkönig'" for solo violin, and contemporary singer-songwriter-guitarist Josh Ritter's "The Oak King." The philosophy professor first reads the poem in the original German, her native language. We talk about the sounds that Goethe uses to convey, for example, the feeling of the mist, the horse's hooves galloping as the father races homeward with the child in his arms, the seductive but sinister invitations of the Erlking, the child's dread of the Erlking, and the finality of the child's eventual untimely death. The English professor then reads two translations, and the class discusses the creativity of the translator's art. Subsequently, students create their own versions of "The Erlking," which they can do in any artistic form, an assignment for which they have produced translations into Romanian, Russian, Spanish; a storyboard; original artwork; a play in which the Erlking is a drug dealer preying on a child; a rap version; and other manifestations. We ask the students afterwards to reflect on their projects and the creative choices they made. One student explains that for her Erlking translation, she researched archaic Russian words so that she could "put the feeling of an old fairy-tale" into her project. This thoughtful response and her classmates' reflections make clear the cumulative impact of the cluster's activities on our students' ability to read, understand, know a poem, and then synthesize it as they creatively "riff" on it like jazz players.

Students clearly benefit from the cluster's interwoven curriculum. Our dovetailed readings, linked philosophy and English paper assignments, and hands-on creative and intellectual activities make the cluster a rich and deep learning experience for them. As one student observed, "Our philosophy class combined with our English class gave me a better understanding into our class readings. What I didn't understand in one class I was able to understand with the other." Moreover, we instructors discovered the value of integrative paper assignments during the first semester teaching the cluster when we assigned just one paper that merged topics from the philosophy and English classes. We found that students could provide more detailed analyses for this integrative assignment than in an assignment designed solely for our individual classes. Eventually, we linked all of the philosophy papers with readings from the English class. Reading these papers aloud to each other to co-grade them was also a fruitful experience, giving us new insights into each other's fields and validating the effectiveness of our planned and spontaneous teaching strategies.

Reading is a creative act, an act of linking the new to what a reader has already read or experienced. We are creative when we find "a new unity"—"a

likeness between things which were not thought alike before, and this gives…a sense of both richness and understanding. The creative mind is a mind that looks for unexpected likenesses" (Bronowski, 1985, p. 247). This ability to see "likenesses" among readings is apparent late in the semester when we read Rilke's poem "The Panther" and the students, themselves, recall Plato's prisoners and liken them to Rilke's caged panther. Students in the cluster learn to "read" in a more holistic way, actively look for links and associations, and creatively find new ties to arrive at their own unique and informed interpretations. One student, reflecting on the course, wrote of the challenge of examining "so many different ideas simultaneously," adding that "it was really great that we were able to draw parallels between the work we did in every class." In the terminology of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), students understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create, and they do so across disciplines. They also witness the process since they can observe their instructors, like jazz improvisers, spontaneously coming up with new ideas. We are learning, too, as the class starts to swing. We are playing the "tune" with our students, and we are all listening to each other and responding creatively.

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