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Encouraging Integrative Learning through Current Events and Learning Portfolios

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Abstract:

In this essay, an Art History professor frustrated by student indifference to ancient art develops a new course goal and class activity. The professor hoped to foster students' appreciation of ancient cultures while they worked toward achieving deep, lasting learning. In the first version of the activity, students were asked to read current events and connect them to the course material as well as to their other classes and own lives. Although some students met some of the goal, the professor was not satisfied. The activity was revised, with students including their article responses in learning portfolios and reflecting upon them in a final portfolio essay. The portfolio reflection essays indicate that many students succeed in achieving integrative learning, while the essays themselves facilitate integrative scholarship and student appreciation of the subject matter.

Key Words:

Integrative learning, significant learning, portfolios, reflection, art history, archaeology.

Introduction

"Art History was never a subject of real interest for me, though I did not think I would hate it. I took this class only to fulfill a core requirement. As it turned out, Art History related to more of my classes than I thought. AH 10 helped to put history into a more tangible, human perspective. History was no longer just words." (Third-year student, final learning portfolio reflection, 2008)

It was difficult to engage students in AH 10, a survey of Western art from the prehistoric through medieval periods. According to a survey completed on the first day of class, most students enroll in the class to fulfill the university's "arts" distribution requirement, not because they are interested in ancient art. Although I could not change students' motivations for enrolling, I wanted students to better understand the course's relevance. I hoped that students' increased appreciation would mean an increased incentive to learn about the ancient world, both during the semester and after

graduation. In reworking my course activities to achieve this objective, I developed an activity using current events. For the present version of the activity, students write about and orally present current news articles that relate to the course, and reflect upon them in a learning portfolio. This essay describes the evolution of the activity from 2005 to 2008, and its results, which have surpassed my aspirations in students' achieving significant learning—that is, lasting, important change in terms of the learner's life (Fink, 2003). Outcomes indicate that students make considerable gains in integrative learning, one of the leading reforms in higher education today.

My Teaching Philosophy and Goals

In 2005, an AH 10 student expressed a typical attitude toward ancient art when answering a final course evaluation question that asked him to evaluate the instructors' strengths and weaknesses: "fine, if your [sic] into the subject." A general lack of energy in the classroom was another sign of student apathy. One reason for this apathy could be a lack of familiarity with the subject; most students today are exposed to more modern than ancient history at the secondary and college levels. Student exposure to more modern history may have caused the difference in tone in a different course I teach, AH 11. Like AH 10, the AH 11 survey of early modern — contemporary art is also a course most students use to fulfill the arts requirement (students are not required to have taken AH 10 beforehand). In AH 11, I perceived livelier discussions and more enthusiastic participation in class activities. During class, students often offered connections to their history classes. According to the first-day survey, students were also eager to learn about famous artists whose names they knew, such as Michelangelo and Monet. Was it possible to garner such interest in cave paintings and cathedrals? How?

My overarching goals as a teacher include providing students with skills with which they can analyze works of art thoughtfully and knowledgeably; making students able to recognize how art reflects and affects the cultures in which it was made; improving students' critical thinking skills through problem identification and creative engagement with these problems; and fostering students to have life-long interests in, and sensitivity to, visual culture. In order to meet these goals, my classes are a combination of lecture and collaborative teaching techniques, in which the students engage in dialogues with their peers and with me. Through lectures and reading assignments, I contextualize works of art within their historical, social, and economic periods so students can better understand their meaning and significance. It is important for me that students understand that Art History is a living discipline in which many questions are open to discussion and debate. Most importantly, I want students to retain their learning after the final exam.

After attending a workshop led by Dee Fink on integrated course design and reading his book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, I realized that although it was part of my teaching philosophy, the AH 10 syllabus included no goal about sparking and sustaining interest in the course material, and therefore I had no specific activities specifically designed to do so. A new goal therefore became "To increase students' interest in ancient art and cultures and current research on them." I hoped that students' increased appreciation

would mean an increased incentive to learn about the ancient world, during the semester, throughout their college career, and after graduation. I do not aim for students to become ancient art historians or archaeologists, but rather to seek out ancient art and architecture when traveling, read news reports about new finds and theories, and even tune into programs on archaeology on television. The goal's lack of a specific time frame is important because deep learning should continue to occur after a course ends. Despite the goal's lifelong nature, I chose to develop an activity to make measurable progress toward it in one semester.

The Current Events Activity: Outcomes Before

Using Fink's learning outcomes taxonomy is an effective way to develop class activities in which students work toward higher-level learning (Fink, 2003). The taxonomy comprises six learning outcomes: foundational knowledge, integration, application, learning how to learn, caring, and human dimension. Although it is not requisite that one activity promote all six of the outcomes, an activity using current events seemed an optimal way for students to integrate their learning while increasing their awareness of the ancient world's continued importance to humanity. By choosing the articles themselves, presumably they would care about the topics. Ideally, responding to the articles and intentionally connecting them to the course material would reinforce and augment their foundational knowledge as they became accustomed to applying their learning. Students would learn how to learn by using sources other than their textbook to gather information. In the first version of the activity, in fall 2005, students subscribed to a listserv or news update service on archaeology/the ancient world (Appendix A). Every other week, they chose any article, as long as they could relate it to something studied in our class, another class, and/or their own lives in a written response. Each class meeting, one student presented her article and the connections she had made, and the article formed the basis for a brief class discussion.

The first time that I used the activity, responses and discussions that the articles stimulated showed success in the outcomes of foundational knowledge. Students' revisited course material that appeared in the news. For example, throughout the semester, students chose to read the latest news items on the Greek government's campaign to reclaim the Parthenon sculptures from the British Museum, even though, according to the syllabus, the Classical Greece unit had formally ended. This indicated that they were continually reviewing course content—foundational knowledge. Mid-semester, one student read a travel feature on Skara Brae, a Neolithic village off the coast of Scotland that we had studied early in the semester, and wrote in her response "I had numerous questions about this site that the article answered" (2005).

The written responses suggested that integration outcomes were successful. Many universities, including my own, are trying to foster integrative learning, especially after the American Association of Colleges and Universities began promoting it with a publication and conference on the topic (Huber and Hutchings, 2004). Integrative learning is loosely defined as students' ability to connect ideas, skills, and experiences—across disciplines and to their lives (Fink, 2009; Huber and Hutchings). The activity prompted students to make such connections, and most succeeded. For example, one student compared an excavation of a thousand-year old Peruvian

brewery to a paper she had written on an ancient Egyptian tomb model of a brewery, describing their similarities and differences and relating them to the importance of beer in human history. An even more sophisticated kind of integration occurred when a student read an article on the discovery of lions' skulls that were part of a medieval royal menagerie at the Tower of London and linked this to images of lions examined in class. Later in the semester, because of the previous article, she chose an article on the discovery of an ancient Egyptian king's mummified lion. She then discussed lions as symbols of imperial power throughout time and place. This shows sustained integration, or connections over time. By having students choose their own articles, rather than my choosing and assigning them, they appear more engaged as evidenced by such connections they make independently.

Getting students to care and change their interests and/or values about the material was more difficult than expected. The semester-end evaluation forms of fall 2005 demonstrated that many students perceived the activity as "busywork" and still did not care. In response to the question "*Were there any aspects of the course that did not contribute to your learning*", students answered "the articles waste time," "articles were unnecessary," "articles didn't seem to help." Seven out of twenty-three students, 30% of the class, listed the current event activity as not contributing to their learning. It was clear that although students were integrating well, they did not understand why they were doing the activity, and therefore were not meeting the caring outcome. I had originally developed the assignment in order to improve students' appreciation of the subject matter through deep learning; something had to change.

Current Events Activity: Outcomes after Implementation of Learning Portfolios

How could I use the valuable connections students were making to help improve their caring, therefore achieving the course goal of increasing interest in the material now and in future? The answer was reflection. In fall 2008 I began asking students to gather written work from class in portfolios and to also include a narrative reflection in which they consider if and how they fulfilled the course's goals while citing the artifacts as evidence (Appendix B). John Zubizarretta has shown how learning portfolios aid in significant learning, if students continuously self-consciously think about their contents and their relationship to learning. By being a vehicle for reflection, the portfolio, therefore, can promote higher-level learning (Zubizarretta, 2009, 41). In their article responses, students continued to fulfill the taxonomy, applying their new knowledge to what they had learned in class. One article reported the discovery of a Roman tomb into which oil or wine had been poured in remembrance of the dead. A student related the tomb to a Greek funerary vase we had studied that featured a hole in the bottom, through which oil would have flowed into a grave. In her response, she wrote "I was fascinated that I actually made a connection between this modern day discovery and what I had learned in class" (2008). Students recognized the importance of the human dimension of what we studied. Their responses showed understanding that the objects we see in the book, on the screen, and in the museum, are part of the human experience. On an article describing what contemporary economists call the first recorded credit crunch, in ancient Rome, a student wrote "The article connected to me

personally because many friends and family work in the financial markets and are being affected by the credit crunch of today” (2008).

Integration continued to occur; for example, a student read an article revealing that, based on archaeological and DNA analysis, tuberculosis is three thousand years older than previously thought. She wrote “Since I have taken a microbiology course here at Fairfield, it was really interesting for me to connect my knowledge. I have studied mycobacterium t.b. under the microscope in the lab and have performed some of the analysis techniques described in the article” (2008). She then effectively linked this biological discovery to art history, although there is not an obvious relationship: “This related to class because it demonstrates how new findings can completely change an existing theory, whether it is about a strain of bacterium or a famous piece of art.” The reflections showed an improvement in integration from 2005. Students identified common themes, in content and their own approaches to the material, which they may not have recognized if not prompted to look at and think about the articles and other activities as a group. In discussing the current events’ relationship to the course material, as well as to his own Politics major, one student identified “a ubiquitous theme: imperialism and its effects” (2008). Both in their article responses, where students are encouraged to reflect on the articles’ content, and the more broad portfolio essay, they are now reflecting throughout the semester in some form, which makes their integration more intentional. For example, one student wrote “This course has taught me how to digest what I read and actually take something away from it. By actively reading and by keeping up with new developments in the field, such as the articles, I can become more adept at research and at being knowledgeable in that field of study” (2008).

Notably, the reflection narratives suggest that making students articulate the connections they have made helps to make them care. In the fall 2008 final course evaluations, not one student listed the article activity as not contributing to their learning, in contrast to 30% of the class in 2005. One student wrote about deciding to study abroad in Italy rather than her original choice of Australia because seeing in person what she had studied in class was now more important to her than her previous motivation—warm weather and a beach: “I want to get the most knowledge and culture possible out of my study abroad experience” (2008). A few wrote about planning to take their parents to a museum over winter break. Referring to one of her article responses, a student wrote “Because of this very article, I got to thinking of how much art history intrigues me and makes me want to further my studies” (2008). In evaluating the reflections, it is important not to reward students for complimenting the course, but rather to grade using criteria used in grading a traditional paper: for using evidence (citations of their written work) to support their assertions, and for writing style (Zubizaretta 2009). Portfolios make up one-third of my students’ final exam grade.

Measuring significant learning after the course has ended is more difficult, but there is evidence indicating that it happens. Former students email me with reports of their first-hand encounters with subjects studied in class, such as Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Not only did they remember that they had studied the site, but the fact that they were enthusiastic enough to write me a note suggests that the goal of appreciating ancient art was fulfilled. Similar responses did happen occasionally in semesters before I began the activity, but most tellingly--because it relates directly to the activity-- former students

now send emails with links to articles they come across. For example, from a fourth-year business student: "I thought taking AH 10 would be a mistake/disaster. In reality, it became my favorite class. Attached is an article I read and thought you might enjoy—reminded me of our last class." For me, a marketing major's reading archaeology news over winter break is happy evidence of a goal accomplished.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a current events activity helps students see a discipline as a living one while building enthusiasm (this semester, for example, many students are eagerly following stories about the looting of archaeological sites in Iraq and Egypt). By tracking news stories of students' choice throughout the semester, they become invested in the topic. To achieve deep learning, however, a learning portfolio with a reflection component is invaluable. The reflection essay facilitates the fulfillment of several goals by encouraging students to consider their learning consciously. It also serves as proof of the current event activity's effectiveness in fostering integrative and deep learning.

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Appendix A

Archaeological Current Event Responses

Look at the most recent Explorator or New York Times collections of articles on archaeology. (<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Explorator/> and http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/archaeology_and_anthropology/index.html)

In 1-2 paragraphs, summarize the news story's content and answer the following questions:

- What do you find interesting or surprising about the story?
- How does the story relate to what we have studied in class?
- How does the story relate to any of your other classes, or your life?
- What questions does the story inspire?

Appendix B

Portfolios

Goal: For students to meaningfully reflect on their learning experience in the course by putting together a document that describes and illustrates it

Artifacts: You will submit a folder or binder with at least five writing samples (for example: architecture analysis, museum paper, current event responses, tests, written homework assignments) that you feel best demonstrate your learning in Art History. Re-number the pages consecutively, because you will cite them in your Narrative statement.

Narrative statement:

Write an essay that reflects upon your learning this semester. Use the following questions to guide your reflection. Cite pages from your attached writing samples. (Adapted from Fink 2003 119-121)

- Content: What key ideas or information did you learn about Art History 10?
- Application: What did you learn about how to apply the content/methods of the course?
- Integration: What parts of your knowledge have you been able to connect, either within this course or to other courses, or to your life?
- Human dimension: What have you learned about the human dimension of this subject?
- Caring: Have any of your interests or values changed as a result of this course?
- Learning how to learn: What have you learned about *how* you learn, or how you *could* learn, more effectively?

You will not be graded on the quality of your learning experience, but on your description and documentation of it.