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Designing Courses for Significant Learning: Voices of Experience: New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 119

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7 Two humanities professors shift from the rut of readings, memorization, and papers to having students ask personalized questions and make concepts relevant outside the classroom.

Integrating Big Questions with Real-World Applications: Gradual Redesign in Philosophy and Art History

Marice Rose, Roben Torosyan

As a philosopher and an art historian, we decided to record our experience after discovering we shared similar journeys changing our courses. We had both been dissatisfied with our students' learning outcomes and our own tired patterns of teaching.

After learning about Fink's (2003) integrated course design (ICD) and his six kinds of learning objectives, we both saw ways to have students not only learn required foundational material but also apply that learning to life, communicate creatively about it, and value the resulting experience deeply. We were ready to change the way we teach. With transformed methods—and some bumps and dead-ends along the way—we envisioned larger dreams; helped our students integrate goals, activities, and assessments; and experienced a sense of continuing renewal in our teaching energies.

This chapter highlights our individual efforts to transform our classes in philosophy (Roben Torosyan) and art history (Marice Rose). Although we were working on the same kinds of issues (for example, developing learning goals and creating learning activities), as we implemented integrated course design, we are reporting our experiences in separate sections of this chapter.

We are indebted to Larry Miners and Kathy Nantz of Fairfield University for introducing us to Dee Fink's work, bringing Dee to campus through the Center for Academic Excellence and the Core Integration Initiative, and giving us collegial support over the years.

Why We Changed

Both of us faced students' preconceived notions about our disciplines. And we had fallen into the rut of traditional methods of teaching in the arts and humanities, such as requiring memorization of facts and images distant to students, which do little to dispel these notions (see Figure 7.1).

Philosophy

When I say I teach philosophy, many respond, "Whoa, deep. What do you do with that anyway?" In my first philosophy course, my undergraduates reacted similarly, perceiving the requirement as simply one dead philosopher after another. After I saw Fink's (2003) six kinds of learning objectives, I wanted my students to achieve all of them, from grasping basic approaches like foundationalism and constructivism to questioning their own takes on truth, power, and ethics.

At the same time, there was pressure from the discipline to focus on rigorous primary sources and specific philosophical assumptions. Learners were not supposed to focus on personal relevance so much that they neglected to call on the thinking of philosophers explicitly. Furthermore, common cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987) in modern and contemporary philosophy has focused on mostly Western, male philosophers. Yet as I learned about teaching for diversity and social justice (Fairfield University, 2008), I wanted to change the content to include more feminist and black authors and nontraditional perspectives.

Art History

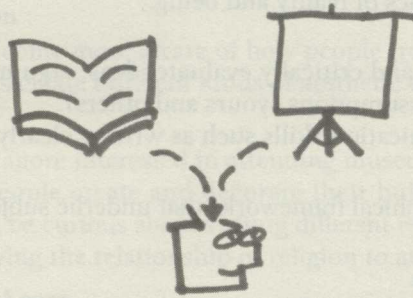
When I tell new acquaintances that I teach art history, most respond with a variation of the following: "I took art history in college. We sat in the dark while the professor showed hundreds of slides and we frantically took notes. Flying buttresses! I wish I remembered more of it now!" The first time I taught History of Medieval Art, I similarly prepared slide lists and lectured on slide after slide. Students memorized slides for tests and researched a medieval artwork for a paper, assessments that were as tedious for me to grade as for the students to prepare and complete. I doubt that today they retain much from the course.

I wanted the course to become part of each student's intellectual and knowledge base rather than just fulfill art history's reputation as a never-ending series of slides in a dark room. I wanted students to understand how to take their art history learning and apply it to the outside world, even if they never visited the cathedrals of Europe.

What We Changed, Part I: New Learning Goals

To integrate all three components of ICD, as Fink recommends, we had to rework goals, activities, and assessments (see Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.1 The Rut: One-Way Input of Text, Visual Content, and Pet Activities



This process had to begin with the task of creating new learning goals. After reviewing what we had been doing and the results of teaching that way, we both decided that our common general learning goal was to integrate big questions with real-world applications. And that led to more specific goals for each of our courses.

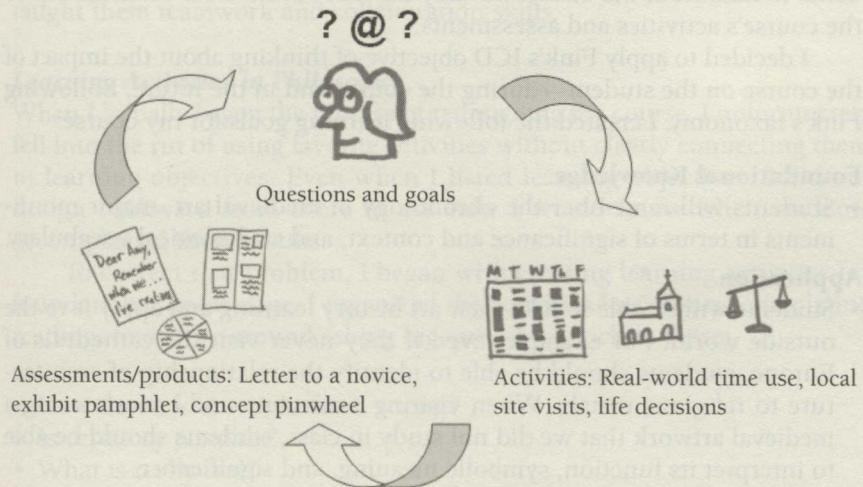
Creating New Learning Goals in Philosophy

Based on Fink’s taxonomy, I reformulated my learning goals as the following:

Foundational Knowledge

- Learn fundamental questions, principles, generalizations, and theories, including the use of scientific reason, the enlightenment revolution, and postmodernism.

Figure 7.2 Integrating Goals, Activities, and Assessments



- Understand twelve big philosophical questions about (1) the ethics of right and wrong, (2) our epistemologies of truth and knowledge, and (3) the metaphysics of reality and being.

Application

- Learn to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view; question assumptions (yours and others).
- Develop communication skills such as writing clearly and briefly.

Integration

- Integrate philosophical frameworks that underlie subjects and cross areas of life.

Human Dimension

- Develop a clear understanding of, and commitment to, your own philosophy and values.
- Develop confidence in your strengths and ability to reason on your own.
- Increase your sense of responsibility for serving others.

Caring

- Pursue interest in your own big philosophical questions.
- Write for thinking and for fun.
- Increase your sense of responsibility for making the world more fair.

Learning How to Learn

- Learn from mistakes, take action, and change behavior to reach goals.

Creating New Learning Goals in Art History

After attending Fink's workshop, my entire approach to the class changed—and it continues to change. My first realization was that my teaching was too content centered. The goals as written on the syllabus (for example, "You will be able to discuss medieval monuments using art historical tools and approaches") were vague and did not fully convey what I wished students to take from the class, and they did not have a clear relationship to the course's activities and assessments.

I decided to apply Fink's ICD objective of thinking about the impact of the course on the student—during the course and in the future. Following Fink's taxonomy, I created the following learning goals for my course:

Foundational Knowledge

- Students will remember the chronology of medieval art, major monuments in terms of significance and context, and art historical vocabulary.

Application

- Students will be able to take their art history learning and apply it to the outside world. For example, even if they never visit the cathedrals of Europe, students should be able to identify the relationship of architecture to religious rituals. When visiting a museum and encountering a medieval artwork that we did not study in class, students should be able to interpret its function, symbolic meaning, and significance.

Integration

- Students will relate medieval art, history, and society.

Human Dimension

- Students will become more aware of how people from various cultures, places, and times create different kinds of aesthetic environments.

Caring

- Students will be more interested in attending museums; be interested in how different people create and decorate their built environments; be excited to travel; be curious about visiting different religions' sacred structures and observing the relationship of religion to art.

Learning How to Learn

- Students will have a clear sense of what they would like to learn next about art and art history.
- They will learn about their own learning styles and how different types of activities relate.

What We Changed, Part II: Using Real-World Activities and Assessments

New learning goals inevitably require new learning and assessment activities. Our new goals made us realize we needed to get out of the classroom, figuratively and literally. They also forced us to reconsider the function of all our learning and assessment activities. We needed to reconsider how we wanted students to use their textbooks. Organizing learning activities around questions, for example, would allow students to apply knowledge rather than just regurgitate it. Reducing reading assignments let us focus on how well students used course material in the world outside class. And having students work together to complete many assessments, often creatively, taught them teamwork and collaboration skills.

Learning Activities in Philosophy

When I initially began the process of redesigning my course, I unfortunately fell into the rut of using favorite activities without clearly connecting them to learning objectives. Even when I listed learning objectives, I did not design backward from there to ask how I would know when students accomplished those results.

To correct that problem, I began with creating learning activities for foundational knowledge. I organized the activities less around completing readings and more around asking big questions, such as these:

- How do we know right from wrong?
- Is certainty possible?
- What is really real?

Because students rarely completed readings, and even when they did, they misunderstood the most basic concepts, I reduced the reading assignments by approximately 50 percent. This focus on quality over quantity to fulfill the foundational knowledge goals sometimes meant assigning only seven pages a week when we were tackling difficult material.

To encourage close reading of texts, I had groups take different reading sections, capture main points with examples, and generate a question for discussion. Finally, before summing up key points each session, I asked groups to come up with a metaphor, haiku, visual scribble, or skit to capture what they saw as vital insights.

For one application activity, students were to apply course concepts to improve thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. In order to elicit real-world improvement of such personal activities, learners kept a twenty-four-hour time line of how free or determined they felt and behaved in fifteen-minute increments, inspired by how Fink had his students note the geography behind everything they see and touch in a day.

A second application activity asked students to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view. I asked them to write a letter to a philosophical novice. The task had students working to teach a key question to someone outside the class. In the letter, they were to pose a key question, analyze it using an example from personal life, and represent an opposing viewpoint fairly.

I used small groups to support the application goal of improving students' writing skills. Using peer feedback, they practiced stages of brainstorming, rethinking their whole approach, moving big pieces around, and fine proofreading.

Learning Activities in Art History

One of the difficulties of teaching a medieval art class is that students do not have a previous interest in the course content, which ranges from early Christian catacombs to Gothic cathedrals. Nor do they find it relevant to their twenty-first-century lives. In order to make the class more relevant to the students, I revised learning goals. Class format, activities, and assessments therefore needed to focus on big questions that are not restricted to the medieval period—for example:

- What is the relationship of belief, ritual, and community to religious art and architecture?
- What is the impact of pilgrimage on art and architecture?

I lectured less in the classroom, trusting that students were receiving foundational information from reading assignments. It was reassuring to know that content learning was not lost. For example, knowledge of canonical medieval monuments is one of the foundational course goals.

However, I reduced the number of monuments for which students were responsible. I also reduced the percentage of the final grade that slide-based quizzes were worth. The focus now is more on students' writing up activity results and reflections.

To help students relate better to the textbook material, we went outside the classroom to visit a Greek Orthodox church, where we studied icons and domes. With this activity, the class was acquiring and reinforcing their foundational knowledge.

One excellent example of student-centered learning was an assignment that required students to develop a cohesive medieval art exhibition. Working in teams, students chose a theme like "the Virgin Mary." They selected works of art from varied times and places, drew a gallery plan explaining placement and relationships of the artworks, composed a letter to the university president explaining why the exhibit deserved support, and brainstormed educational outreach events for fellow students and community members. These assessments were especially authentic, as they were similar to a museum professional's activities.

Another activity asked students to apply learning about the Middle Ages to the present. Students chose a modern pilgrimage site and researched and wrote papers comparing the modern site to a medieval one. Another assignment had students using art historical vocabulary to compare a religious building in their home town to a religious building in medieval times.

These activities were meaningful and relevant because they brought medieval art into the students' era. The activities were also more personal because students took greater ownership when they were responsible for choosing artworks to include or exclude.

What Happened

With the redesign of our courses, an important outcome was that students seemed to find our new goals relevant to contemporary living. They became inventive in undertaking generative activities as they made the big questions meaningful and applied course content to real-world observations. In fact, a new energy became palpable in our classrooms.

Results of the Changes in Philosophy

During my first year of changing this course, students' goals surprisingly matched most of mine. Since many were graduating seniors, most wanted, for example, to figure out the human dimension of "what to do with my life" after graduation. Student letters to a novice also explained foundational concepts, although not with great critical reflection.

When students generated haiku and visual representations, the outcomes surprised me as well as guest presenters. Students excelled as they translated complex concepts like meta-reflexivity and deconstruction into

devices like pinwheels and cartoon cards recursively pointing to one another, showing integration of concepts.

A human dimension goal had students respond to readings personally by posting in online discussions an example of how they were prompted to question their own philosophical values and assumptions. When students thus found relevant application of otherwise turgid material, they became energized and engaged. They addressed specific incidents, like times they were generous or altruistic, by asking when enjoying an act interferes with staying morally committed on principle. Many students saw more paradoxes, like how they chose to study or work out, and yet were also determined by heredity and environment—under pressure from parents and peers.

Results of the Changes in Art History

In the first semester using ICD, there was significantly more energy in the classroom due to the decrease in lecturing and increase in group work and discussion. Students clearly spent more time on their projects than on the previous research paper assignment. I was particularly impressed with the results of the projects relating medieval architecture and pilgrimage to the present day. Each fulfilled the application, integration, human dimension, and foundational knowledge goals.

Furthermore, although creativity had not been a learning objective, I saw wonderful examples of it as students produced educational pamphlets for their exhibitions and wrote some papers from a medieval pilgrim's viewpoint. Another unforeseen bonus was that I looked forward to reading their work and learned a great deal myself. For example, I had not known that contemporary Girl Scout troop visits to founder Juliette Low's house in Savannah include most of the features of a medieval religious pilgrimage.

These projects required more collaboration and discussion than previously assigned research papers. Instead of passively absorbing information from a podium, students were learning from one another. By sharing their work, they learned different ways to synthesize the material, which helped in their learning how to learn.

Our Learning

Despite the positive results from our initial changes, we both discovered that we needed to refine our course designs not once but continually, to improve both student engagement and our own. We continue to try to strike the right balance between foundational knowledge and our other significant learning goals. We still find that transparency about our course goals is essential, both for the students to learn and for us to teach effectively.

Philosophy

By my third year, my grading criteria became more specific, as I posted sample student work, pointing out where writing reached my learning objectives well or inadequately. The students' letters to a novice then improved: many students hooked the addressee's interest, explained a philosophical concept or dilemma clearly, or gave a concrete example from actual experience. Most important, students questioned their own points of view more—sometimes even dearly held beliefs.

I have learned that I should better prepare students for the hardest parts of thinking and writing; for example, how to take a perspective that is not easily torn down. I also need to have individual classes develop a rubric with sample phrases that demonstrate each criterion.

One problem that concerned me was that most students could not remember anything specific to any philosopher. I need to link the ideas of actual philosophers to students' thinking. If not, "What would Descartes say?" I could at least ask, "What do you say, and how does Descartes help?"

To better convey the urgent need for justice, sustainability, and diversity awareness, I need to push students beyond simply noticing and questioning things, to asking, "How will I make a difference, here and now?" (Fairfield University, 2008).

To reach this and other goals, I keep relearning the need to decide two or three things students should learn each session and put them on the board with an agenda.

Overall, then, the more freedom students have, combined with a clear sense of what is expected of them, the more they may thrive and I may renew my methods of working with them.

Art History

The transition was not flawless. I was not prepared for moderating class discussions and grading more creative projects. I was not transparent enough in my motivations in introducing student-centered learning in class. Some students wrote in the course evaluations that the in-class group projects "felt like busywork"; one student wrote, "I like the format of every other art history class I have taken much more than this one."

By the second time I taught the course, I trusted students to take the lead in discussion, even asking them to moderate in-class debates. I became better at providing rubrics and examples with assignments, and at addressing their need to know what I was looking for in nontraditional projects.

I brought back more lecture, but was careful not to repeat but to clarify and expand what was in the textbook, and I included more textbook-based questions on quizzes to ensure that students were responsible for completing readings to obtain foundational knowledge. The balance seems to be successful; one student wrote, "I like the style of teaching—the combination of

lecture, readings, and projects made the class interesting. I feel like I learned a lot from this course.”

I have to keep reminding myself to explain the course goals and how class activities and assessments relate to them, for both my own focus and my students' own learning. I need to balance teaching students how to think like an art historian by giving them tools to consider the art that is part of their everyday lives. I want them to not only be able to identify a Gothic flying buttress but to see how it relates to their spatial experience inside Chartres Cathedral as they travel abroad after graduation and to understand why their home town churches do not have flying buttresses.

Despite my continuous revising of the course, the one constant is that now no student who takes a class with me can truthfully say that art history is about spitting out what they memorized in a dark room.

Conclusion

We shifted core courses in modern philosophy and medieval art history from focusing on readings and papers to examining big questions about personal beliefs and values and integrating learning with lives in motion. Innovations included reading less but more deeply, using personalized questions to apply learning to life, and designing exhibitions and other visual products organized around student-chosen themes.

Evidence showed that learners gained interest, internalized knowledge creatively, and found relevance in subjects that can often alienate the uninitiated. Furthermore, we realized ways to winnow objectives and specify guidelines and models for student work, while continuing to renew our own engagement with the teaching.

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