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Teaching outside the HE classroom symposium

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Challenges for art historians teaching outside the HE classroom

Teaching 'outside the classroom' is one of the biggest challenges facing art historians. Students are often shy of paintings, sculptures, and buildings because they don't know how to make sense of objects and what to say about them. This paper describes an assessment initiative in a first-year undergraduate gallery-based History of Art module which was designed to help students engage more closely with objects and to practice genres of writing that are appropriate to the study of painting, drawing, sculpture and architecture. In the assessment students were asked to devise a proposal for a gallery display, offer feedback on their peers' proposals, and then each write a piece of work for a catalogue accompanying the display, using the winning proposal as the working brief.

The exercise had four key aims:

- to help the students work more closely with physical objects and spaces
- to introduce the students to different genres of art historical writing
- to help the students into the habit of writing regularly rather than at the end of a module
- to devise an assessment that was true to the working conditions faced by practicing art historians.

The paper will outline the exercise, discuss its implementation and progress, and present some feedback given by the students. It will conclude with suggestions about how it can be developed for use in the coming academic year, and will seek further ideas and feedback from the audience.

Outline the initiative

The exercise was intended to address three more-or-less discipline-specific issues:

- to help the students work more closely with physical objects and spaces
- to introduce the students to different genres of art historical writing
- to devise an assessment that was true to the working conditions faced by practicing art historians.

I was also keen to address a broad curriculum-specific issue, which is that in a modularised curriculum students don't get enough practice at writing. I wanted to devise an assessment that incorporated small writing tasks in the build-up to a larger piece of writing. I also wanted to give the students an opportunity to engage in peer review not only in the discipline but also in the context of first-year study, using the marking criteria for first year undergraduate work.

What I devised is described briefly in the coursework rubric at the end of this paper.

Describe its implementation

The coursework was introduced in week 7. I had devised it over reading week. It followed a first piece of coursework which had been a single essay where students had been invited to devise their own questions.

There were a number of risks with this initiative. Introducing something new with almost no prior warning was a risk. To offset potential anxiety and grumbles I took extra care to explain to students why I had devised this coursework and how I hoped it would benefit them. Two factors were uppermost in my calculations: that more writing practice, distributed over four weeks, would be

welcomed; and that students would appreciate that this was a way of working that was authentic to the discipline.

At this point I should say that I myself am curating an exhibition in an art gallery for early next year, and I mentioned this on a number of occasions to help students see there was a parallel between what I was doing, and what they were doing.

Two further variables introduced an element of risk into the whole thing. For the thing to work well, everyone needed to take part and keep to schedule. Students also needed to be willing to work with one another in the groups. In the event, everyone did take part, and everyone kept to time. I think the tight schedule focused their attention and the relatively light workload meant that people could keep up.

I offloaded a lot of the logistical burden by using Moodle for most elements of the coursework, such as putting up details of the assessment, asking students to upload their work there, collating the proposals and putting them on Moodle for the students to download, and encouraging everyone to use the forums to discuss their work with one another. To my mild surprise the forums were used quite a lot, with students posting comments, sharing things, and replying to each other quite frequently. Conversation picked up after the class in week 9 where I revealed whose proposal was the 'winner' in each group. Sixteen students and myself posted about sixty comments in just over a week following week 9's class.

What I didn't foresee at all was that the biggest challenges would be pedagogical rather than organisational. What proved difficult was how students engaged with the subject matter and in particular how they were able to adapt their prior understanding of the subject matter to the ways it became shaped by the assessment.

There were no problems with the proposals themselves: everyone produced a proposal that met the requirements set out in the brief. Students had to vote on the best proposals from the other group, and those that received the most votes were ones that stood out from the rest. Proposals about **'selfies' and self portraiture, landscape painting**, and still-life painting, were the most popular, along with one which was about **'women of power'**. Students rewarded novelty - we hadn't looked much at landscape painting and self-portraiture on the course itself - and also topicality, as with the proposals about 'selfies', and clarity, which is what made the proposal about 'women of power' stand out from the four or five other proposals about female portraiture. Unfortunately a good proposal about architecture was overlooked, probably on account of the subject matter.

Interestingly, both winning proposals were written by guys, even though there were only three guys in the group. I wonder why?

The real problems emerged after the winning proposals had been identified and each group had taken them as their working brief for the exhibition. What happened is that everyone quickly identified a subject for their individual piece of writing, and started to work on it. There was no real evidence of either group discussing and 'commissioning' pieces of writing, or agreeing which works should go in the exhibition and using that to decide which themes to address in their writing. This was not a problem per se as the assessment was exclusively on individual not group performance. But what emerged was that students were very reluctant to revise their initial impressions. For example, one group had a very imaginative brief called 'The beauty of everyday life', but most members interpreted this rather straightforwardly as being about **still-life painting**. Even when they were challenged on the fact that still-life and everyday life are not the same thing, even being somewhat opposites (still-life painting being a luxury good and decidedly *not* everyday), students were reluctant to change their minds. This came to a head in the penultimate class, where three students from the first group complained that they had already written their essays and were frustrated that they might have to change them. We had spent part of the class thinking about what 'everyday life' meant in the context

of early Romanticism, in artists such as **J. M. W. Turner** and **Joshua Cristall**. Two students did write their essays on genre drawings, but the others were annoyed to find that their initial interpretation of the brief was not as appropriate as I think they assumed it was.

I have to sympathise a little with these students. Their rashness in choosing a subject meant their work did not show as sophisticated a grasp of the subject as I had hoped (eg. identifying 'still-life' with 'everyday life'), and - crucially - they were not willing to either acknowledge this or to revise their work to any great extent in the light of group discussion or my own feedback. Here was an opportunity to show some intellectual development by having their preconceptions challenged and to integrate their current understanding with new ideas, yet the opportunity was not taken. But the compressed timeframe of two weeks at the end of the term probably meant they felt they could not afford to change their minds or their work, and led them to be defensive rather than receptive when new ideas were put to them.

The other group was working with a brief on 'women of power', and like the first group had each said 'I'd like to do x' without working on a shared interpretation of the brief. In some cases students chose works some way outside the scope of the course, or not in a London collection (which was one of the criteria). In such cases I pointed out that their choices did not fit with the criteria but most refused to change their choice of subject matter, or were very reluctant to do so. Their choice of subject expressed how they interpreted the brief. Their reluctance to change their choices constituted a refusal to challenge or revise their interpretation and showed just how resilient their initial construction of understanding could prove to be. In some cases I suspect these understandings had been formed at A-level. Whatever the source, the problem was that it inhibited the integration of new understanding to the extent that they began to shape their approach to the subject to their prior understanding. This was particularly evident with the group writing about 'every-day life', where it became evident that some students were trying to make a case for the significance of still life painting in seventeenth and eighteenth century British art which wasn't driven by the evidence. This was particularly galling because this was exactly the kind of problem I had wanted to address in the first place.

In light of the issues I encountered with the first group in the penultimate class, I was able to tailor the class for the second group a little and so I got them to walk through the galleries in Tate Britain having a look on the walls and thinking about the theme in more detail. There was only limited evidence that this had any effect on what the students chose to write about, but the wider point is that I realised that relating the class to what they are doing in their coursework is a great way of helping students to integrate new knowledge - what we were studying on the course - with existing structures of understanding.

Further developments

The process was meant to be an opportunity to learn but in practice it raised some serious barriers to understanding because it inhibited reflection and made students defensive rather than open to revising their ideas.

The students who answered a questionnaire all said that the coursework helped them to work with the objects. Most said it involved more work than usual. They felt the project had potential but wanted more time, and more guidance from me.

In my journal I noted that more time needs to be given to interpreting the themes and choosing works, and that I should have more input into their discussions, perhaps by chairing them. I also learned that the exercise works better if done in relation to a specific body of work - eg. works in a specific gallery. Identifying a specific collection(s) or gallery(s) should be part of the brief.

Finally, the assessment presents a great opportunity for making class topics meaningful because they can be related to the specific theme chosen by the group for their assessment; for example, we can have a more meaningful discussion about 'Romanticism' if the group is already thinking about a theme such as 'everyday life' or 'women of power'.

I am keen to develop this work next year, but will probably put more emphasis on the production of a single piece of work based on a winning proposal and with emphasis being put on an extended (and organised) discussion and interpretation of the theme.

Coursework rubric

For this coursework I would like you to work in groups to propose a temporary room display in the National Gallery (room 35) and produce a catalogue to accompany the display. All the written work you produce will be on your own but requires co-ordination in groups.

The coursework consists of a longer piece of writing, preceded by two preparatory activities.

1. The first activity is to write a short proposal for the room display. This should be c.250 words. The display must bring art from sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain into juxtaposition with art from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In your proposal you must identify a specific theme for the display, the reasons for putting it on, and an initial wish-list of at least six works, three from first half of the course, three from second. Buildings may be included. **The deadline for this proposal is 23:59 on Wednesday 5 March.** *Please note that this will count for 12.5% of the mark for this coursework. I will be using the marking criteria for Y1 work (a link is on the course Moodle site).*
2. The second activity is to read all the proposals submitted by the other group, vote for your favourite, and provide written feedback. The feedback should be c.250 words. In order to write the feedback you should use the marking criteria for Y1 work as parameters (a link is on our Moodle site). **The deadline for your votes and feedback is 23:59 on Wednesday 12 March.** *Please note that this will count for 12.5% of the mark for this coursework. I will mark you on how closely you adhere to the Y1 marking criteria.*
3. In our class on Thursday 6 March I will reveal whose proposal the other group voted for. We will spend 30 minutes discussing how to go about writing the essays and entries for the catalogue based on the winning proposal.
4. The final activity will be to write either an essay or catalogue entries for the catalogue (75% of marks). The work should be c.1500 words. **The deadline for your final work is Friday 29 March.** I will use the marking criteria for Y1 work. I will mark your work on an individual basis. But before then ...
5. Each group will give a 30-minute presentation of their room display in the final week of class (28 March). This will not be marked BUT the curator of the university Art Museum will come and listen to the presentations and give feedback, which you can then incorporate into your work, which is due the next day.

I will ask you to attach printed copies of the two pieces of preparatory work to the final work when you hand it in on 29 March.