

IPESL Final Report

1. Project title

“Leaving the Lights On: Participatory Learning and Art History” by Alisa Eimen

2. Purpose

This project was designed to explore and develop new teaching methodologies that focus on participatory learning in art history, by varying resources, projects, pace, and instructional media. Designed in conjunction with a medieval art and architecture course I taught last spring, project goals were to develop a series of in-class, discipline-specific assignments and activities that emphasizes critical thinking.

3. Results:

The project enhanced student learning in several ways.

Activities:

In each class meeting, I strove to punctuate lectures with a variety of in-class activities that challenged students to actively and immediately process and use the material. Strategies I used included one-minute papers, peer discussion, and summarization—all of which emphasized and illustrated comprehension and critical evaluation of the material. Additionally, I included brief reading assignments of primary material to amplify the course text and lecture and introduced unknown artworks that students had to critically evaluate based on their course knowledge. All of these exercises enhanced critical skills through looking, reading, writing, and discussion actively in each meeting. That is, in addition to learning canonical information, students interrogated the material, distinguished between fact and interpretation, learned to recognize analysis from perspective, and developed their own analytical responses to this material based on relational, interdisciplinary studies.

Assessment:

Assessment of their written work, discussion, and exams throughout the semester clearly illustrated significant improvements and fluency in critical methods for most students. Even the students who were interested only in passing the course benefited from these activities, because of their repetition throughout the term. Assessment was conducted weekly, by reviewing written responses to in-class exercises and discussion. Additionally, quizzes and exams provided another layer of assessment that measured the usefulness of critical-thinking activities vis-à-vis examination performance. Finally, the course term paper provided the students a sustained period of work that utilized all methods of critical thinking. The paper was designed as, first, a critical assessment of recent scholarship on an assigned artwork, which was submitted as an annotated bibliography. Then, based on their research, students were challenged to develop a thesis that framed a critical evaluation of the research, which they did in consultation with me. Finally, they were given the opportunity to revise their final papers based on my comments. This final stage of

their work enabled me to gauge improvements, the usefulness of the assignment's organization, as well as my comments on student work.

Materials ("support mechanisms"):

Developing the activities addressed above generated a body of new materials for the course. These include: a list of film/video related to course content; a folder of digital images that complement those in the textbook; a list of relevant Web sites; and a series of digitized primary documents for student use.

Postscript:

The strategies and exercises I developed last term have had a noticeable affect on my overall pedagogy and enthusiasm for teaching. While preparing syllabi for the current semester I revamped all assignments based on my experiences last term, because I have moved from a content-focused approach to one that emphasizes methodology. Additionally, I revised my introductory lectures to reflect this critical approach that challenges assumptions and foregrounds method. Content remains and rigor is elevated because it is literally framed by an interrogation of how we come to know what we know.

4. Issues:

Challenges that arose were twofold: (1) how to design activities that would engage a majority of students and (2) how to pair lecture/activity without compromising the amount of information art history majors expect to cover in the course. Throughout the semester I asked the students for their feedback on assignments, their interest-level and relation to course goals and assessment. I inquired in both formal and informal ways, from asking them in class to having them anonymously fill out questionnaires. Based on their responses, I was able to continually shape and reshape the questions, assignments, and discussions we engaged in throughout the term.

5. Dissemination:

The results of this project will be disseminated locally and nationally. As a member of the MSU Medieval and Early Modern Research Group, I will organize a spring colloquium that addresses creative pedagogies to move all manner of historians beyond the textbook/lecture model. Using this as a springboard, I will propose a roundtable session at my annual professional meeting in order to bring together art historians with similar pedagogical concerns.