Social Pedagogy: Using Comment Streams to Analyze Visual Art

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Summary

This sequence of activities, taken from a required, general education course, LASC 200: The Arts in New York City, focuses on the artistic effect of "defamiliarization" in the work of black American visual artists. The sequence addresses two course learning outcomes:

- Students will be able to articulate how meaning is created in various forms of art (visual art, dance, theater, public art, outsider art) and how meaning is conveyed and interpreted via these art forms.
- Students will be able to produce well-reasoned and well-researched written and oral arguments using evidence to support one's conclusions.

The sequence utilizes social pedagogy in that students respond to each other's comments via the course ePortfolio during class time and use each other's ideas to generate insight and analysis in their own writing. The sequence is integrative in the sense that students construct an interpretation of a specific painting by combining ideas from hooks's essay, their individual experience of the painting, and their analysis of their classmate's response.

As preparation for the activities, students read and discuss "Art on My Mind," a short essay by bell hooks that introduces "defamiliarization" as a critical strategy

deployed by black American visual artists. The essay helps students think about different reasons artists present reality in unreal or surreal ways and prepares them to analyze visual art through inquiry into the circumstances of its production. In class, students view and comment on paintings by representative artists via the course ePortfolio and comment on each other's comments. As follow-up, students write a short essay explaining which visual elements of the painting may have provoked a classmate's initial response.

Description

This sequence of activities takes place over several days and includes in-class and out-of-class work by faculty and students. In terms of preparation, the first steps are for the faculty member to choose a technique, design element, or theory of art on which to focus and then a reading or readings that introduces it in general terms. Once the focal element and reading(s) have been gathered, the faculty member gathers representative images and uses them to create galleries (one gallery per artist) on the course ePortfolio. Representative images can be gathered via Google and museum database searches.

In this instance, the focal element for the sequence was the artistic effect of "defamiliarization" as described in bell hooks's essay, "Art on My Mind," which focuses on visual art by African Americans since 1930. hooks argues that black artists turn away from realism in the mid-twentieth century as a way to challenge racist representations of the cultural life of black communities. By taking viewers "away from the real" using collages and distorted images, artists such as Romare Bearen and Jean-Michel Basquiat unlock the progressive and even revolutionary potential of visual art. Rather than simply serving as a form of protest, art that "defamiliarizes," in hooks's account, reorders the viewer's sense of what is possible in the world, creating and strengthening communities by carving out imaginative space for shared experiences of liberation. Many in the black community initially reject art that transforms rather than represents reality because such representations do not conform to dominant (white) expectations. For hooks,

embracing non-traditional representations is a revolutionary act because it involves confronting the subtle and internalized racisms that plague everyday life.

First-year college students often respond to challenging texts and images by rejecting them as unfamiliar and therefore bad or worthless. Viewing Bearden's and Basquiat's art with hooks's argument about "defamiliarization" in mind encourages them to approach aesthetic experience as an opportunity to think about the world and their role(s) in it rather than as a course requirement or as something that doesn't apply to them.

Part I: Practice Step by Step

From the student perspective, the sequence of activities is as follows:

1. Homework: Read hooks's essay "Art on My Mind" and identify the main points

2. Class #1: Discuss "Art on My Mind" and construct a collaborative understanding of "defamiliarization" and its importance to hooks, the artists she discusses and their audiences

3. Class #2, part 1: View galleries of representative images of paintings by Romare Bearden and Jean-Michel Basquiat on the course ePortfolio and comment on the galleries using the comments feature. Prompts include: What do you see in the painting? How does the painting makes you feel? What's important, etc. If possible, the comment stream should be shown on a screen the whole class can see.

    NOTE: Students are not directed to comment on "defamiliarization." Asking for specific comments at this stage in the assignment would overdetermine their experience of the images of the paintings and limit the authenticity of their comments

4. Class #2, part 2: Read the comment stream for one or another of the galleries and respond to comments that surprise you, make you angry, make you confused, etc.

5. Homework: Write a 300-word essay in response to the following prompt:

Using at least one visual element and/or one principle of design discussed in class, respond to a classmate's comment on a Bearden or Basquiat painting. How does the painter use visual elements and principles of design to provoke a response to his work?

> NOTE: Visual Elements and Principles of Design have been introduced in previous class sessions and are central elements of the entire course. Students work with specific elements and principles in several assignments throughout the semester.

Part II: The Role of Social Pedagogy in Advancing Student Learning

This sequence gives students opportunities to practice visual literacy and thinking about images from multiple perspectives. In addition, they apply theoretical knowledge about the effect of defamiliarization to specific works of art. The sequence is integrative in the sense that students construct an interpretation of a specific painting by combining ideas from hooks's essay, their individual experience of the painting, and their analysis of their classmate's response. It utilizes the ePortfolio as a tool for focusing student attention on specific works of art and archiving individual responses: students return to the comment stream created during class—a form of low-stakes writing—as they work on the higher-stakes essay with which the sequence culminates. The audiences involved are the students and the instructor. Students did not share their essays with each other for this assignment. The experience of reading and responding to each other's comments in real-time made their understanding of the effect of defamiliarization more concrete.

Part III: The Role of Design Principles in Describing this Practice

The sequence of activities gives students an opportunity to inquire about how their classmate's approach course materials and to recognize the insight contained in

their classmate's comments and ideas. Because the formal writing assignment asks them to identify specific elements of the painting that might have provoked their classmate's response, students write from a position of expertise, from the position of someone who knows enough about the visual elements of a painting to explain how the elements combine to provoke a response in a viewer.

Since students used classmates' responses to write the formal essay, they were not asked to reflect. Instead, the assignment asked them to view the painting from their classmate's perspective and to work backwards from their classmate's response to determine what elements of the painting may have provoked it. Another version of this assignment might ask students to write from a response with which they disagree and to include a reflection on how and why their perspective on the painting differs.

Practice Identifiers

The sequence of activities was developed for one section of a course that fulfills one of the College's general education requirements.

Helping Student Advance Their Learning
Reflection as a form of Integrative Learning

- Make connections within a course

- Make connections across courses and semesters

- Make connections across disciplines

- Make connections among academic experiences, co-curricular & lived experiences

Reflection as Systematic and Disciplined form of Inquiry

- A structured and scaffolded process

- The Reflective Cycle

- Connecting their learning to Gen Ed or programmatic competencies

Reflection as Social Pedagogy

- Sharing their ePortfolio w/ and getting comments from faculty

- Sharing & engaging in integrative ePortfolio commentary w/ other students
- Sharing their ePortfolio & getting comments from external groups
- Linking their ePortfolio to other students' ePortfolio
- Using their eP as a site for collaborative projects with other students

Reflection as a Process of Personal Change

- Articulating their educational and career goals
- Considering their evolving personal relationship to learning and education
- Completing/revising a plan of study
- Planning/preparing for transfer or advanced education
- Preparing ePortfolio to showcase to potential employers

Connections to Other Sectors of the Catalyst

Professional Development

The faculty member who designed the sequence is a member of the campus ePortfolio (C2L) team. In addition, he participated in a workshop focused specifically on using the ePortfolio in the Arts course.

Outcomes Assessment

This sequence of activities is not associated with outcomes assessment work; however, the activity gives students opportunities to practice skills associated with college-wide outcomes.

Technology

The ePortfolio gallery feature makes it possible for the class to view a collection of images simultaneously. Students access the galleries using individual laptops. The instructor makes the comment stream visible on the classroom's Smartboard or projection screen. Making the comment stream visible during the class raises student interest in commenting because they see their names and ideas show up on screen. This accelerates discussion and builds interest in the formal writing assignment given as follow-up.

Scaling Up

The faculty member who developed this sequence has shared it with other instructors as part of professional development workshops. The course ePortfolio is public within the campus community, as well, so other instructors might access it as they plan their version of the course.

Conclusion

The strength of this sequence is that it uses ePortfolio to create conversations about complex visual art. Using the comment stream lowers the stakes of the conversation because typing a short response to a painting is easier than offering a comment during class discussion. Following-up the public commenting session with a formal writing assignment consolidates the learning students experience in commenting and gives them a way to integrate their response to the galleries of visual art, responses by classmates, and the theoretical discussion of "defamiliarization" in hooks's essay.

This sequence of activities, or an adapted version, could be used across all sections of the course when it is next offered. Faculty could be invited to create their own galleries of paintings/images and/or a common gallery of paintings/images could be created that all enrolled students would collectively interpret through the comments feature. Students might also be invited to create, analyze and present galleries of their own focused on specific elements or theories of art using images discovered during the course as part of a culminating assignment for the course. Subsequent iterations of the course could use these student-generated galleries as material for introducing key themes or ideas and/or as material for writing assignments.

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