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Looking Backward by Moving Forward

Exploring New Ways of Teaching Art History Through

Enduring Ideas and Contemporary Artists

There is a catastrophe occurring in the teaching of art history. "We must jostle the misguided, the dull, the uninterested from their accepted visual patterns acquired through daily experience, and we must lead them towards a gradual understanding and knowledge of real artistic values" (Zucker, 1946). While uttered sixty-seven years ago Zucker's lament is valid still today. The visual patterns Zucker mentions as competing with art history at the time were the villains' literature and music. Today's students have a greater variety of media options to deter their attention from the past. Their continual bombardment minute by minute by new texts, images, and music has created a learning environment where traditional modes of pedagogy are no longer effective. The slide-lecture analysis model is still valid for advanced art history study, however for the introductory to art history course filled with students under-exposed to art in the first place a new paradigm needs exploration (Donahue-Wallace, Follette, & Pappas, 2008).

Mention art history to a high school student and their eyes begin to roll followed by the sound of heavy sighs. The past model of teaching art history suggested from Discipline Based Art Education met with the same results. Under DBAE, students were introduced to an artist or art movement and expected to respond with a similar styled studio project or a written analysis (Dobbs, 1998). The lack of clearly defined standards on exactly which artists to include in the art history portion of DBAE and the depth of the subject has frustrated art teachers for years. Ormond (2011) reveals that in New Zealand, art history is a three year separate high school course. Although my students complied with the DBAE model, it was not effective in my classroom for creating meaning and interest in past art works. In his book *Drive* (2009), Pink explains how you move from compliance to engagement. "The opposite of autonomy is control. Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement. And engagement leads to mastery" (p. 108). In the classroom I have control and the students want their grade ergo they comply but this mirrors so many of their other courses where they are regurgitating the same facts on command. Quickly forgotten regurgitated facts diminish learning. To create autonomy in presenting art history I propose teaching art history as a separate high school course linking past

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art work to enduring ideas and contemporary artists as delineated in the book *Rethinking Curriculum in Art* (Stewart & Walker, 2005).

Enduring ideas are comprised of the experiences common to humans through the ages" (Stewart & Walker, 2005). Similar to themes, enduring ideas examine ideas of interest to people regardless of their chronological or geographical place. "Enduring ideas are not owned by one curriculum and are important in linking academic subject matter with life-focused issues" (p. 25). Broad ideas such as identity, nature, conflict, rites of passage or power can open up a dialogue in which to connect the past to the present. Additionally, the authors' relate that knowledge of other artists' artworks from diverse sources can usefully inform art making, especially the work contemporary artists. Contemporary artists have stepped out of past art stylistic 'isms" such as Cubism and Impressionism which relied on being taught and evaluated on the basis of technical formalist structures (p. 109).   Contemporary artists engage in art making that is connected to the social and political realms (p. 109). To develop a teaching method to link enduring ideas and contemporary artists with art history requires a look at the traditional methods of art history delivery.

Graham (1995) posits that the four main areas of art history should be reformed; canonicity, chronology, closure, and subjectivity. Canonicity speaks to the selection of what to include in a survey art history course. Chronology speaks to the sequential grouping in presenting art on a time-line. Closure speaks to a neatly organized arrangement of one form of art leading to the next as if it followed a master plan. Subjectivity speaks to the marginalization of women and non-European others and how survey courses perpetuate the alienation of those populations from the art world. Graham would like to end the use of art history survey textbooks which perpetuate the linear presentation of Western ideas of important art works. He suggests replacing the linear chronological presentation with themed sections that relate less to Western ideas and incorporate more of a global perspective.

While Graham (1995) looks for a departure from the "next slide please" model of art history, he still focuses how the "others" as he defines women and non-western cultures, fit in around a Westernized version of art history. He admits that a complete departure from the survey courses is not possible due to the expense and political entanglements involved in reframing their place in curriculums. Graham's themes while not bound to the survey model still revolve around an albeit less strict chronological model. His themes encompass the art of early

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states, cities of the ancient world, art of the age of discovery, and individuality and tradition in the modern world.

Garoian (1988) suggests incorporating art history lightly into studio practices combined with separate art history classes in high school. Garoian's opinion supports Graham's (1995) belief that art history should have a separate place in the art curriculum. Garoian posits that to teach the course separately allows for more development of critical thinking skills. He feels students will attach meaning to art history by having it as the main focus of the class. Where Garoian and I separate is the methods used to engage the students in critical thinking. Garoian believes oral and written analyses of art works are enough to engage the students in meaningful learning. If meaningful learning is more apt to happen if the students use enduring ideas to connect themselves to the art of the past, why add contemporary art to the new model?

An answer to that question is found in the growing demand from today's college students for courses in contemporary art. Miranda (2011) cites a New York Times report relates about 80 percent of applicants to art history programs are choosing contemporary art as their major. Miranda also relates a comment by Professor of Art History, Dr. Patricia Hills, "a dissertation on contemporary art would have been inconceivable 30 or 40 years ago, now such dissertations are commonplace". Students of today are leading the demand for contemporary art. The dissolution of traditional cartographic boarders through technology has created a global demand for the discussion of commonalities through art making. Hills again states, "Many contemporary artists are reframing the past and bringing the past to the present," she adds, "you need the past for understanding contemporaneity. The change in the market demands a change in the strategy in the Academy" (Miranda, 2011). It makes sense that if students are demanding a paradigm shift, that shift will hold more meaning for them.

Phelan and Rogoff (2001), speak about the importance of melding old models in assimilating what is important in art history with new models of visual culture to include those groups excluded in the past. Rogoff acknowledges in her own journey in art history pedagogy, she may have submitted to the already established certitudes of prior power and knowledge beliefs. Rogoff refers to Foucault's ideas in challenging mainstream forms of information delivery. The authors' admit beginning a new paradigm shift for delivering art history without a clear model to build from admittedly is a challenge. While positing that studying visual culture is the avenue for including those excluded from art history in the past, the authors have more

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questions; "labeling this shift I am trying to make from the analytical to a participatory methodology-of wanting to approach visual culture from a different set of questions, to ask: What comes after the critical analysis of culture? What goes beyond the cataloguing of the hidden structures, the invisible powers, seductions, and numerous offenses we have been preoccupied with for so long; beyond the processes of marking and making visible those who have been included and those who have been excluded"(p. 34)? The use of enduring ideas in presenting art history again surface to answer their question.

The use of enduring ideas creates a personalization of course content (Stewart & Walker, 2005). A support to parallel the effectiveness of using enduring ideas to create meaning in teaching art history is found in the work of Powell & Kusuma-Powell (2012). They are co-directors of Education Across Frontiers, organizations devoted to the professional learning of teachers in international schools and have taught diverse populations in the United States, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The article does not speak to the arts; however the author's use personalization as a means as of balancing the need to provide standards based learning against diversity in learning styles. They suggest a way of doing this is to translate topics into teachable concepts. This article complements the research by Graham (1995) who suggests moving to a more theme based presentation of information rather than facts and a chronological based teaching model. The authors' present information on how to evaluate which concepts will provide desired learning outcomes. There is discussion about the ineffectiveness of the regurgitation of facts as opposed to the effectiveness of a more generalized model of concept learning. The authors state that standards-based curriculum can become an overloaded program of content delivery with a narrow focus on high stakes testing, which affects the interest in learning for the student. The article supports the use of enduring ideas to ameliorate teaching an overwhelming amount of foreign information to students.

Instructors have used similar interventions of using enduring ideas to enhance learning. Rose (2012) used artifacts or "heirlooms" belonging to students to prompt a connection to art history. The idea is to connect meaning between a period of art and actual art work existing in the student's family. Rose found that having a meaningful connection to the art work made the students more excited about the cultural period the art making existed in. Connecting history with heirlooms increased empathy towards the people living in the time the object existed in originally. The historical memory deepened because of the personalization of the object. Using

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historical artifacts from student's homes parallels the potential of the use of enduring ideas as non-tangible artifacts to create personal meaning and empathy to involve students in art history. Additionally, enduring ideas are available to everyone as heirlooms may not be.

Cotti & Johnson (2012) present the use of alternative pedagogies in a non-arts class. The authors' employed the use of the historic novel, *The Lost Painting* by Jonathan Harr (2005) to illustrate topics covered in an introductory economics course. The novel provided new engaging ways of making meaning for their students of obtuse economic concepts. Reading this seemingly unconnected topic to my research provided a model of support for a new way of teaching art history. The focus in creating meaning from the past to apply to understandings in the present was most predominant in my selection of this reference. Although the authors found teaching in this method requires a large time commitment from the instructor, it proved worth the effort to break free of the "chalk and talk" models of most economics courses. Students reported understanding economic concepts and enjoyed the class as well. A finding I hope to replicate for art history.

Conclusion

Creating a new way of teaching art history to my secondary students is ambitious and necessary. The old models of teaching art history are not engaging enough for today's digital natives. They are a generation that is able to access names and dates in the time it takes to type out these words. Studying art history by using chronological fact testing and analytical response methods no longer is effective. An emotional connection with the curriculum will compete for their attention with the continuous presence of visual culture. Connecting art history with enduring ideas and linking each idea with an exciting contemporary artist could do just that.

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