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Making American Art an Engaging General Education Course

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Penn State Harrisburg, a branch campus of the state university where I teach, shares the attributes of many colleges and universities today. Our students come from as near as the town of Middletown in south-central Pennsylvania, where the campus lies, and as far away as India, China, and Nigeria. Students include those who could thrive at the most selective universities as well as those who are not fully prepared for college. Numerous humanities courses, including American Art, are heavily populated with students who take these offerings to meet General Education requirements. Despite valiant efforts, the number of humanities majors and minors pales in comparison to students focused on Computer Science, Engineering, and other STEM fields. Many faculty invest significant effort in general education courses to deliver high-quality instruction; some also attempt to attract majors and minors through these courses.

This essay focuses on teaching techniques directed toward those students who are unlikely to be convinced to pursue majors, minors, or other forms of humanities concentrations. Aptitude for other areas of study, unfamiliarity with the subjects and methods of art history and American studies, and pressures to focus on more lucrative professional fields with burgeoning employment opportunities are among the reasons for an initial lack of interest in the topic. My approach, then, is not necessarily to seek to convert students to a new major or minor, but to add breadth to their undergraduate instruction. I also want them to be comfortable going into a museum (many have not entered one before), to rejoice over seeing familiar works of art, perhaps share their knowledge with a friend or family member, and maybe even to question what a given museum or historic site does and does not display. The class accomplishes an array of more standard pedagogical aims—think Bloom's taxonomy here—by providing opportunities to explore new information and ideas, to interpret and contextualize art within larger issues in society and culture, and to ask students to recall and synthesize material during traditional quizzes and exams. Activities that involve motion, sketching, and creative writing allow students to generate their own artistic expressions.

Each year that I have taught full time (since 2010), I have become yet more aware of the need to create a dynamic, engaged classroom. While enthusiastic, I am not truly a performer, and it is clear that the "sage on a stage" model, with students diligently taking notes, rarely makes for good retention of material, much less

deep analysis and understanding of it.[1] What follows are examples of the kinds of in-class and out-of-class activities in which the students and I have engaged. I am the first to note that many of my ideas have been adapted from College Art Association presentations, Facebook threads, and web sites on pedagogy.[2] Here I offer my reflections of what has worked in the field and how I have learned and adapted these techniques with my own students. I should add that I have taken a hiatus from teaching the course. American Studies doctoral candidate Alicia Bott is currently the instructor of record and thus I have included some of her innovations.

To place our students in a bit more context, it is worth noting that in a class of twenty-five or thirty students, there may be only one or two who have chosen a major or minor in some area of the humanities. Many are first-generation college students. Although the majority are of typical college age or a few years older, it is not unusual to have several students who have returned to college later in life. Circumstances that can make learning challenging include limited on-campus housing with its attendant support systems, many students' significant commutes, and the fact that some are responsible for children, siblings, parents, and even grandparents. Part- or full-time work in addition to heavy course loads is common. Although resources to enhance student learning, including for international students and those with learning disabilities, have increased over time, there are nonetheless many barriers to student success.

I mention factors that might provide obstacles to students in courses such as American Art to contextualize what can and cannot happen inside and outside the classroom. Any field trip must take place during class hours and return students to the campus in time for their next class, as they often schedule courses back to back to minimize commuting time and conform to job hours. Thus while one can request modest funding for field trips farther away from the campus, in reality only a modest number of students will be able to participate. Similarly, asking students to purchase a watercolor set and a small piece of plexiglass for an art project was hampered by the cost (under $10) and logistics to obtain the materials. In the future, requesting funds to acquire the supplies may make this exercise

[1] Alison Cook-Sather and Elliott Shore, "Breaking the Rule of Discipline in Interdisciplinarity: Redefining Professors, Students, and Staff as Faculty," *Journal of Research Practice* 2007;3(2):M15.

[2] See, for example, Art History Teaching Resources http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/about/ and Appreciating Art Appreciation: A Resource for Art and Art History Professor, https://www.facebook.com/groups/249439295158579/.

possible. Students' time and financial resources provide very real parameters for the course.[3]

I will begin with a discussion of how the course is structured, then address some of the interactive elements and field trips that supplement more traditional approaches. For many years, I have used the third edition of Frances Pohl's *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* as the course textbook.[4] Of the textbooks I examined, Pohl's approach seemed closest to the contextual art history with which I was most comfortable. At the time, the textbooks under consideration were all about the same price (about $80 new) which I knew to be high for our students, especially the non-majors. Thus, each semester I have placed two copies of the text on reserve in our campus library.

Why the third edition? When I first began teaching the course, the text was relatively expensive, regardless of format. As time went on and later editions were published, the price began to drop. The third edition, published in 2012, was revised and updated in 2017, but I felt I could add more recent interpretations and examples of visual culture readily in the classroom.

I found that even when the students could rent the book or purchase it used, some were not acquiring it. So, with the help of graduate students Eileen Fresta and Sarah Wilson, I created a parallel "text" of online resources. I recommended that students use the book but gave them the option of following the free links instead. At the beginning of each semester I checked that the links were up to date (although some invariably failed mid-semester), and I regularly added new resources. Among the most often used sources were smarthistory.org, the metmuseum.org, Wikipedia, and museum entries related to specific works of art. Videos, particularly those relating to modern art, were included as well. Creating an online resource was a significant amount of work initially but was relatively easy to maintain. To integrate the book and on-line options as well as differentiate between core works and contextual ones in my PowerPoint presentations in the classroom, I highlighted the most important images with yellow outlines.

From informal and formal evaluations, I learned that some students appreciated the free resource and used it. Others, particularly as the semester wore on, did

[3] On access to art resources, see, for example, Jennifer Katz-Buonincontro, "Creativity for Whom? Art Education in the Age of Creative Agency, Decreased Resources, and Unequal Art Achievement Outcomes." Art Education 71, no. 6 (11, 2018): 34-37.

[4] Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2012). I modeled the syllabus on one developed by my former colleague Robin Veder, who taught an earlier version of the course when it attracted mostly Humanities and American Studies majors.

little or no reading. So, what is the solution? Alicia Bott, the doctoral candidate currently teaching the course, requires students to contribute a 250-word post to Canvas, our learning platform, summarizing and analyzing the reading and responding to another classmate's ideas each week. When I return to teaching the course, I will likely adopt this approach.

PowerPoint presentations helped structure each class, which most semesters met twice a week for 75 minutes. My presentations were image-heavy, but also included some summary slides, such as "reasons for the Civil War." I found that summary slides, like the 4" x 5" handouts that listed timelines that covered the American Revolution, Early National period, etc., compensated for students' varied knowledge of key historical facts and sequences of events and their ability to synthesize this information (e.g. the reasons for the Civil War). The supplementary materials reinforced students' knowledge of history and enabled them to more meaningfully connect it to the artworks under discussion. As important, the teaching materials reflected the perspective of the social production of art, an approach that paralleled the textbook and online readings as well as my own research methods.

This approximately 50:50 balance between art history and history enabled us to recently list the course as a coveted Interdomain offering at my university. Yet for this art history class, unlike more history-oriented ones, the artworks were at the center stage during each and every class. History did not "explain" art works, but amplified how and why artists, patrons, and viewers created, acquired, viewed, and used art. I sought to emphasize the roles of culture in a community, noting that art was neither created in a vacuum nor was it simply a reflection of what was going on more broadly in society. I also tried to convey that participants' deliberate actions, such as creating a documentary record of why a sitter wanted a portrait painted, did not always fully reflect why art was created and the meanings it carried. The "American Studies" designation of the American art class, and some of the history classes, provides flexibility for engaging the materials and approaches of multiple fields. However, in history classes I might include a work of art once a week, rather than numerous artworks during each class.. Asking students in a history class to look closely at images can hone their observational and analytical skills as well as reinforce key points. For example, while Benjamin Henry Latrobe's 1809 sketch of a camp meeting amplifies a discussion of camp meetings, it also allows the class to think about such topics as cultural landscapes, racial and gender-based segregation, and religious conversion.[5] Art could be used

[5] The image used was Benjamin Henry Latrobe's sketch of a Methodist camp meeting in Fairfax County, Virginia in 1809, at the Library of Congress.

to reinforce the ties between artistic production and larger societal issues but was primarily meant to amplify historical points and emphasize the degree to which art and history were intertwined.

In American Art in particular, students were wary of the material and how to master it. Shortly before each class, I posted the PowerPoints to Canvas. Many semesters there has been at least one student in the class with learning differences. Having the ability to print out the PowerPoints for notetaking helped accommodate students' learning styles. Further, the complexity of students' lives meant that almost every week, some student had a legitimate reason for missing class; the PowerPoint helped them know what occurred in class. The downside was that about two-thirds of the way through the semester, I found that some students skipped class with some regularity, perceiving that they could get the meat of the class through Canvas.[6] The current instructor of the course has attempted to solve this problem by posting her PowerPoints shortly before the exams for review, rather than having them available all semester.

Having offered an overview of the format of the class, I want to turn to some of the specifics of its structure. I instituted open-note, unannounced quizzes every week to ten days. These were low stakes activities, adding up to ten percent of the grade; I also dropped the two lowest scores. The quizzes had several advantages: they encouraged good note taking (especially by hand), conditioned the students to the testing format, and allowed me to see what points I had not adequately conveyed. In course evaluations, students regularly commented positively on the quizzes.

Each semester I added components to deepen students' active engagement. The first, most obvious, one was incorporating students' involvement in analyzing works of art, an activity that counted toward the class participation portion of their grade. A graduate student who taught high school introduced me to the concept of "think-pair-share," which asks students to discuss such questions in groups of two or three before responding to the instructor's query. Students seemed to relish the chance to talk to one another and were emboldened to speak.

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[6] Daria C. Crawley and Barbara A. Frey, "Examining the Relationship between Course Management Systems, Presentation Software, and Student Learning: An Exploratory Factor Analysis," *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education* 4 (1) (Jan 2008): 1-7, 9-14. Debra L. Worthington and David G. Levasseurb, "To provide or not to provide course PowerPoint slides? The impact of instructor-provided slides upon student attendance and performance," *Computers & Education* 85 (July 2015): 14-22.

Other activities asked students to write 100-word exhibit labels for works of art such as Richard Caton Woodville's *War News from Mexico* (1848), an exercise which in its entirety took about thirty-five minutes. This activity stemmed from my former role as a museum curator, where I learned to write concise labels that asked people to look closely at works of art, connect the works to larger historical and art historical issues, and draw their own conclusions. On a broad level, my approach to classroom teaching and learning mirrored my perspective in the gallery. There were several key differences, however. Over the course of a semester, students were exposed to more, wider-ranging themes than one would garner in a single exhibition visit. For activities such as the label-writing exercise, students had great latitude in what they chose to emphasize and how they did so.

To start, I projected the image, streamed a 10-minute excerpt of a PBS documentary about the Mexican War, briefly discussed the painting, and provided examples of well-written labels for other works of art.[7] Students were given a page-long handout with data about the war, a copy of the image, and tips for good practices for label writing (e.g.: draw the viewer in by beginning with concrete references to what the viewer can see; use short sentences and active voice; assume the audience has no previous knowledge). They had ten minutes to think and write and five to exchange and discuss their label with a neighbor. A handful of students volunteered to read theirs aloud, and all turned in their labels for grading (on an abbreviated check, check plus, or check minus scale). This exercise required close looking, connecting visual analysis with historical data, and provided opportunities to analyze what the artist conveyed about politics, race, gender, and class. The activity also exposed students to the challenges of label writing, including deciding which of many factors to emphasize in a short, written work.

In another class period, students were asked to write a poem about a work of art. In an informal discussion, my colleague Eric Bliman, a writing professor and poet on my campus, mentioned the value of asking students to write poetry in classes other than English ones. Amid a discussion of George Catlin and others' depictions of Native Americans in the nineteenth century, I placed Catlin's *Ma To Toh Pa* (1832) on the screen and asked each student to take a few minutes to write a poem about it. The poem could take any form—it did not have to rhyme and had no length requirements—and the assignment was ungraded. Prompts gave the students the option to summarize what was happening in the image, react to the

[7] For the video, see https://www.pbs.org/video/latino-americans-mexican-american-war/. For writing examples, see the American Alliance of Museum's annual competition winners, https://www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition/.

painting, refer to its historical context, or "whatever." This activity allowed them to choose one or more areas of emphasis: describing what they saw through close looking using their own vocabulary, expressing what they felt in response to the image, and/or explaining how the image was connected to artistic and historical issues. Several students would volunteer to read their poems, and some produced deeply moving responses. What I liked about this open-ended, often reflective, and ungraded activity was that it fostered creative expression, a feature too often lost in relatively traditional survey classes such as mine. This creative writing activity also subtly affirmed the many connections between the arts and the humanities that are not always transparent in the curriculum or our individual teaching.

Western American art also provided an opportunity to talk about the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 90s as well as public responses to art and its interpretation. We begin by discussing works such as Emanuel Leutze's "The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortez and his Troops" (1848). I help students unpack the symbols and meanings in the work and remind them of what we have already learned about the Mexican American War. I then introduce *The West as America* exhibition of 1991 and the controversies that ensued. By reading and discussing label copy and visitors' comments, the students become more aware of the challenges of interpreting art to broad audiences, issues that vary with time, place, content, and delivery.[8] It is my hope that when students visit a museum, they will be more aware of what is conveyed by selection and omission of objects and the content of interpretive materials. I see the museum and the academy struggling to meet many of the same challenges about who, how, and what one learns; how to balance the canon with works of art, topics, issues, and ideas related to those who have traditionally not been represented; and how to equalize access to institutions. Regardless of whether or not they visit a museum, I want to provide another way for students to think analytically, considering what is included as well as what is omitted in visual and textual formats. Creating labels and analyzing exhibitions reflect my interests and curatorial experiences but can be readily done by instructors with different training. These activities also break up a relatively long class and, I hope, allow students to engage with the material in ways they might not in lectures and discussions.

Artist Charles Willson Peale, his family, and his museums provided an opportunity to discuss the breadth of visual culture outside the canon and

[8] For *The West as America* exhibition labels and reviews, see http://people.virginia.edu/~mmw3v/west/home.htm.

introduce another hands-on activity.[9] I first addressed Peale's portraits and collecting in the context of Philadelphia's intellectual and cultural milieu. I then focused on his Philadelphia museum's collecting, display, and audience, using *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) as a central point of discussion. I then shifted to the range of portraits he and others created, including oil paintings, watercolor on ivory portrait miniatures, and paper silhouettes. Late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century silhouettes, a research area of mine, allowed me to talk about physiognomy and the availability of inexpensive portraits. It also provided a place to address patronage, as many well-to-do Philadelphia Quakers' preferred silhouettes over other forms of portraiture. A brief introduction to wealthy Quakers' patronage of silhouettes (and limited interest in oil portraits) allowed me to reinforce the range of reasons people desired portraits and complicate some assumptions about portraits as status markers. As important, I introduced the African American profilist Moses Williams and his roles at the museum. Several images of silhouettes, including one of Williams (Library Company of Philadelphia), and Thomas Jefferson's sketch of a physiognotrace (Library of Congress) provide a forum for addressing how and why silhouettes were thought to capture a sitter's character.[10]

Then it was time for an activity. I asked for four to six volunteers—half to stand in profile against the whiteboard and the others to draw the outline of a classmate's head. I tape pieces of paper on the whiteboard—I use 3M easel-size sticky paper, but legal-size copy paper can work in a pinch. I then project a white screen, which results in strong shadows of each sitter (see Figure 1). With much mirth, the students draw their classmates, becoming aware that tracing a head is difficult and requires choices on the part of the artist. Students can see that even a simple outline of a head produces a likeness that is recognizable to those who know the sitter. But the activity also makes clear that physiognomy, the eighteenth-century notion that one could read an individual's character through his or her facial features, was bunk. As we conclude the exercise, sometimes the artist will sign their work, giving it to the sitter and enacting the final step of a commission. Whether they are watching or participating in this kinesthetic and artistic activity, students have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the historical context for the production of art as well as the techniques for creating it.

[9] For a concise summary of Peale's Museum, see https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/peales-philadelphia-museum/.

[10] Anne Verplanck, "The Silhouette and Quaker Identity in Early National Philadelphia." *Winterthur Portfolio* 43:1 (Spring 2009), 41-78. In another class, I connect the idea of capturing a sitter's character to period comments about Gilbert Stuart's portraits.

Fig. 1. American Art students tracing profiles for class on Peale's Museum, physiognomy, and silhouettes. September 13, 2016. Photo by author.

Another technique, borrowed from a 2013 CAA session, was to create tableaux of paintings with students.[11] Three images were particularly well-suited to this: Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1782), George Caleb Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846), and Thomas Anshutz's *The Ironworker's Noontime* (1880). I would ask for volunteers to recreate the scene, projecting the image on the screen and providing introductory background information. At the side of the room, roughly perpendicular to the screen, students would recreate the scene, using desks and chairs as props and miming the rest. Sometimes a student would capture the scene in a photograph. We would then have a more in-depth discussion of the work. I found that students' recollection of the work, whether its title and date or its

[11] Jessica Santone, "Acting Out: Reenactment in the Art History Classroom Acting Out: Reenactment in the Art History Classroom" in Imagining Creative Teaching Strategies in Art History session, College Art Association, New York, Feb. 15, 2013. Chairs: Lise Kjaer and Marit Dewhurst, The City College of New York, City University of New York. "Modeling What the Professionals Do: Holding a Miniconference in an Art History Survey Course." Marie Gasper-Hulvat, East Stroudsburg University, Feb. 15, 2013.

content, improved from previous semesters when they had participated in or watched a tableau. Although I am not sure exactly why this happened regularly, my assumption is that involving kinesthetic learning helped students remember the work. It also was a memorable activity—in what other class besides theatre could one do such a thing?

We also went outside the classroom, on foot. I lead three field trips that take us up to half a mile from campus; each can be completed during the 50- or 75-minute classes. I schedule the two outdoor ones for the warmer months. In the fall, September or October dates allow the students to get to know one another informally as we walk and work. In April, the trips provide an opportunity for students to reduce stress by being outdoors and doing something away from the classroom and traditional end-of-semester assignments.[12]

One field trip was to the local cemetery a few blocks from campus, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century and remains active today. I obtained informal permission from the cemetery staff for these visits, and the students were asked to steer clear of any mourners or internments. I introduced the cemetery and talked about its layout and changes over time in a prior class. In the cemetery, students work in groups of three to four, and were asked to take notes and present their findings at the end. Each student had a handout with prompts that range from the obvious (what are the most visibly prominent stones?); to questions that required closer looking (how has mourning iconography changed over time? When do you start seeing angels? Pillows? Other forms or designs?); or broader analysis (Are people making distinctions through their grave markers? Are any religious denominations noted or inferred?). I walked from group to group, answering questions and providing additional prompts. We then engaged in a guided discussion at a central, high point in the cemetery that brings together students' observations about what they have seen. We also touched upon the range of cemeteries in the United States—historic, faith-based, private, municipal, active, abandoned, relocated, and so on—and how they operate. The field trip allowed me to introduce cultural landscapes and material culture; make students more aware of their immediate surroundings; and sharpen their visual and analytical skills. For example, students would often notice the twentieth-century markers that highlight military participation from the colonial period onward. Twice students found markers that obliquely referred to Ku Klux Klan membership. In one case, an area student's knowledge of the Klan's presence from older family members helped all of us better comprehend local history. He relayed his understanding that the Klan had been quite active in the region,

[12] I provide options for students with mobility challenges.

perhaps because the town is located only about fifty miles from the Mason-Dixon line.

During a second field trip, we walk to the center of Middletown to look at architecture. In the classroom my coverage of architecture is limited, as another colleague, Caitlin Black, teaches an American architecture class each semester. I cover the canon but, heavily influenced by scholars such as Dell Upton and Katherine C. Grier, talk about how different users experienced spaces and changes to spaces over time.[13] Thus notions of race, class, servitude or enslavement, gender, work, and age are woven into the discussion. But the canon tends to favor what one might term pure examples, not buildings that have been added on to, divided, or otherwise do not closely resemble the original structure.

In the class prior to the field trip I provide a brief introduction, noting the impact of farming, canals, railroads, and other factors on Middletown's colonial and nineteenth-century growth. Again, the students had sheets with prompts to guide their observation and analysis; these also had images of roof types and brief definitions (eaves, etc.) to help them. I pointed out a few features in the 1950s neighborhood we walked through, and when we got to one of the main streets, I gave a brief overview of what to look for. Students then peeled off in pairs to each sketch a house of their choice (see Figure 2). They were asked to capture the rough proportions; sketch the roofline and windows and note the presence of chimneys and dormers; and observe features that the house shares with neighboring houses. I emphasized that close observation, rather than demonstrating drawing skill, was the point of the exercise (although the rare artists in the group shine during this exercise).

[13] Dell Upton,"White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," Places, 2:2 (1984): 59-72.)Katherine C. Grier, *Culture & Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930* Rochester, N.Y.: Strong Museum, 1988...

Figure 2. American Art students sketching buildings in Middletown, Pennsylvania. September 6, 2016. Photo by author.

The students then gathered at the farthest building from campus, and each pair described what they observed as we moved toward campus. As needed, I pointed out where buildings had been added to or otherwise modified. Occasionally a student with carpentry or other building experience would have insights about structural changes over time. Although we endeavored to stay on the sidewalk and otherwise keep our distance from the homes, we sometimes attracted attention from residents. These interactions have resulted in an ongoing rapport with residents and, in one case, an invitation to see the first floor of a renovated home. It is my hope that the students will develop their visual acuity from identifying evidence of earlier structural components and building changes and that they can carry these skills into their everyday life as they walk or drive through other areas. In their course evaluations, students tend to bundle this field trip with the other ones, describing them as positive experiences.

The third trip is campus-specific: our library's special collections section has a small photography collection. It contains few "masterpieces," but has more ordinary images (sometimes reprints) by known and unknown photographers.

This visit took place during class time about three-quarters of the way through the semester, after I introduced photography and focused in some detail on photography related to the Civil War in the classroom. Our location, about 55 miles from Gettysburg National Historical Park and near other Civil War sites, means that many students have greater than average familiarity with that war. This historical connection and prior knowledge amplified the students' engagement with the material. I also provided a history of photography timeline to the students.[14] Our Humanities Librarian, Heidi A. Moyer, introduced the archives and special collections in her purview and discussed good handling techniques.

Often with the help of library assistants, we would divide the students into five groups that rotated among five tables. Each table had several period-specific images from the 1840s to the 1970s. Each student had a two-page handout that listed basic information about each work and contained prompts. For example, with two works by documentary photographer Arthur Rothstein, I noted that both were taken in the 1930s, and asked which one the students think was printed in the 1970s and to discuss with one another how the two photographs differed. A second comment provided context and connects the trip to the classroom:

> What's documentary photography? Jacob Riis**,** *Two Ragamuffins,* "*Didn't Live Nowhere*," c. 1898, was one example from class. Another kind was produced in the 1930s under a federal program (the Farm Security Administration, or FSA) that employed photographers to take pictures to document conditions and government improvements to alleviate rural poverty during the Depression. Specific projects had different guidelines, and some photographers agreed with or chose to not always follow these guidelines.

The instructors moved among the tables, providing additional prompts and information.

The photography study day has strengths and weaknesses. Although the library's collection is not comprehensive, I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have access to it as a teaching resource. Seeing photographs in real life and literally getting outside the classroom make up for any deficits. I also find that some of the less engaged students are riveted by seeing the actual art works. One problem is that I

[14] The timeline is adapted from http://philip.greenspun.com/photography/history-timeline.

scatter the history of photography throughout the course, rather than cover it as a concept or in any depth, and thus have to add a summative section shortly before the field trip. I remain undecided about the best way to approach the history of photography in this course. Discussing daguerreotypes and other photographic images in the context of other nineteenth-century art forms reinforces the connections among different media.[15] On the other hand, addressing the development of photography over many decades also has value. Given the limitations of time, I have opted to cover photography chronologically, with a quick refresher just prior to the library field trip.

Some students find Modern art challenging to comprehend or appreciate. Although I have considered taking them outside with old cans of paint and a canvas tarp to mimic some of Jackson Pollock's techniques, I have settled on a less messy, in-classroom activity. In order to make a connection to Andy Warhol's visual commentaries on consumer culture, I ask them to load either Moldiv (ios) or Camera Effects/Apps for IG (android) on their phones. In class, each student takes a picture of an ordinary object (a snack wrapper works well) or uses an existing one on their phone. I ask them to "create an image that channels modern or contemporary art—such as abstract expressionism, color field, or pop art" and share it with their neighbors. This exercise reinforces artists' use of everyday objects to question a burgeoning consumer culture and highlights their choices regarding content, color, and contrast. More tacitly, it asks students to engage with their own consumption. The project also allows them to utilize their smartphones in class and do something creative that requires no special materials or costs.

While not interactive *per se*, a writing assignment, asking students to analyze peer-reviewed journal articles, has been successful on other fronts. The project was adapted from the idea of a mock conference that had been presented at a session on pedagogy at College Art Association.[16] I prepared a list of recent articles, mostly in *American Art* but also in *Panorama*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* and history journals. I added new works every semester, aiming to show the importance of staying current while also ensuring that all the essays were relatively accessible to an

[15] The Victoria & Albert Museum and the Getty are among the institutions that have produced excellent videos on historic photographic techniques.

[16] Marie Gasper-Hulvat, "Modeling What the Professionals Do: Holding a Miniconference in an Art History Survey Course," in "Imagining Creative Teaching Strategies in Art History" session, College Art Association, New York, Feb. 15, 2013.

undergraduate audience. Each student selected one article, then wrote a three- to four-page paper on it, and made a short class presentation.

In class and in written instructions, I walked the students through the assignment and provided them with an overview of how a scholarly article is constructed. Projecting portions of an article on the screen, I highlighted the standard format—the author usually presents the larger picture in the first one to two paragraphs; notes the argument in the second or third; adds a historiographical paragraph; and so on. Specific prompts asked the students to consider how the author backed up his or her points; how effectively that was done; and how well the author had inserted the argument into a larger (usually historical) context.

The day the paper was due and during the following class, students gave their classmates a five-minute overview of their analyses in chronological order. I supplied an image from each essay as background material. These summaries provided more depth on particular topics than a survey normally covers, amplifying interpretations of Winslow Homer's work or comprehending people's use of specific architectural spaces, to name two topics.[17] They also allowed students another voice in the class, as one prompt asked whether they felt the author had substantiated his or her arguments. Each semester, a few students push back when I encourage thinking about the content of a painting, the time in which it was produced, and what meanings we can derive from it. Winslow Homer's *The Bright Side* and *The Gulf Stream* are among the paintings that spark controversy, as some find it challenging to connect the visual evidence with twenty-first-century interpretations, particularly regarding race. The journal articles exposed the students to the scholarship that underpinned the textbook, online readings, class presentations, and discussions. This exercise also provided a forum to question perspectives and conclusions.

The short essays challenged some students. Many of the students have a lack of confidence or difficulty in writing, sometimes rooted in secondary school preparation, language barriers, learning challenges, or some combination of these factors. My sense is that some had gravitated to individual areas of strength in STEM in their high school preparation, taking fewer courses that focused on honing their writing and analytical skills. Some students sought assistance from our Learning Center, whose strengths I touted often. Others came to me for guidance. I allowed students with the weakest papers to revise and resubmit and many did so after visits to the Learning Center.

[17] Akela Reason, "Of Mules and Men: Winslow Homer's *Rainy Day in Camp*," *American Art* 30:1 (Spring 2016): 92-105. Abigail Van Slyck, "The Spatial Practices of Privilege." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70: 2 (June 2011): 210-239.

The short writing assignment had several unsuccessful precursors. When I first taught the course, I asked students to choose an artist, and we devoted one class to working with the humanities librarian on research. The session exposed students to the wealth of library resources and included a substantive handout. However, in part because of the fine encyclopedia-type entries available on artists online, the assignment lacked depth. A second approach involved students producing posters about an artist with a few accompanying, relevant images. To this, I added instruction on label-writing. Again, many of the projects needed more depth and some students relied too much on others' language. I believe the article-based essays succeeded in part because I provided very precise instructions and made the connection between the purposes of "art history" articles and the journal articles they would find in their own fields. I also salted the list with topics and eras as varied as architecture, photography, colonial portraiture, Civil War "witness" trees, Indian moccasins, and zinc sculpture to appeal to a variety of interests.

Summative testing was another component of the course. As I have done with other general education courses, I had two midterms and a final. I found that breaking up the class, particularly one as unfamiliar to many as visual culture, into smaller chunks makes the subject more manageable for students. The first midterm had the lowest value, and when individual students achieved considerably higher grades on the later exams, I dropped the score on the first one. After some trial and error, I created study guides for the exams and posted a sample essay response from a former, anonymized student. My standard format was to list four to five possible essay questions, note that three would appear on the exam, and students could choose two of those three during the exam.[18] Having the possible essay questions ahead of the exams enabled students to focus their study on the big issues. A typical question asked student to compare Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe* and John Trumbull's *Death of General Warren*,

> These scenes represent two significant battles in North American history. One of these battle scenes was painted for an English audience, the other for an American audience. They are not accurate representations of conflicts, but are meant to convey distinctive viewpoints about countries, battles, and the individuals involved in them. Analyze this previous statement by discussing

[18] Rubrics that listed the key points for each of the questions enabled me to grade more quickly and evenly than I might have otherwise.

> the individuals represented in the two paintings, including "real" figures and ones that are meant to represent "types." You will want to focus on specific elements of each work (pose, clothing, etc.) in an essay that is one to one-and-a-half pages.

Thus, students had parameters for their studying, but obtaining exams from previous semesters would not help them succeed. As noted, creating a tableau of scenes such as *The Death of General Wolfe* resulted in stronger essays. On evaluations, each semester several students commented upon how much they disliked having to answer essay questions. My explanation—"in humanities courses such as American Art writing is a key component"—was not fully convincing.

Slide identification was another part of each exam. After some trial and error, I reduced the number of images that they would have to learn (title, artist/architect, date within ten years) to ten, and five of these would appear on the exam. I explained that this "mental rolodex" of images would be helpful, but the students uniformly disliked the memorization. By the second mid-term, most were accustomed to it—some had created flashcards to enhance their learning of both the images for identification and those for the essays.

To conclude, I want to turn to the goals and objectives of the course, official and otherwise. The official objectives included the ability to recognize and explain major movements, figures, works of art, and issues in the history of American art. A second objective is to examine multiple forms of evidence including objects, images, events, and texts to identify themes, ideas, patterns, and sources of American experiences in an historical period, geographical area, and/or social, political, cultural, religious, or economic context. My more informal objectives, particularly in the context of our campus, fall into the "art appreciation" category. As I really want students to see, understand, and appreciate art, I added a bonus assignment (up to five points) for students who visited a museum with an American art collection during the semester. They needed to produce a page-long summary of their response to the visit (for which I provided prompts), and a photograph or ticket that made it clear that they were there. I made a point to remind students of this option shortly before Thanksgiving and Spring breaks, times when they had more flexibility to visit a museum. At most ten percent of the students took me up on the offer. However, in the final class, in which I made clear the nation-wide range of museums that have strong collections of American art and note that many museums have some free hours, I observed some enthusiasm. Informal conversations during the semester and after suggest that additional students indeed get to museums.

I wish I had a way to measure the success of each of these approaches and the approaches *in toto*. Doing an interactive activity, such as creating a tableau of George Caleb Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846) in the first class seems to increase student engagement throughout the semester. And as I noted earlier, participating in or observing the tableau resulted in a higher ability to identify and analyze a work in comparison to previous years when we had not done them. I regret that I did not save the exams to retrospectively analyze them. But quantifiable assessment measures, such as comparing how well exam essay responses from 2012 to 2018 met learning objectives, may have too many variables. To me, one of the largest variables is a student body with broad ranges of preparation for college. Another key variable is student expectations—I have found that in all undergraduate courses I teach (art history, museum studies, American studies, etc.), each year the students are more and more receptive to interactive components, and less responsive to traditional learning practices. My solution is in each class, including American art, to find more ways to engage students with hands-on or interactive activities.

One of the key factors in my ongoing changes to this and other courses has been my awareness of Penn State Harrisburg's student body and its changing needs. In tandem with large-scale patterns at other colleges and universities, the number of majors in the humanities, including our program in American Studies, have declined. Roughly concurrent changes in our General Education requirements have meant that there remains significant demand for our courses, particularly interdisciplinary ones. I feel a strong need to provide high-quality, current content in an accessible form regardless of who is in the classroom. Thus, I have sought out pedagogy sessions at conferences such as the College Art Association's annual meeting, used online resources, and employed social media to glean tips—largely from world survey courses—to attempt to more fully engage students. My approach has been piecemeal and additive, rather than systematic. I have also learned much from my colleagues in our Center for Teaching Excellence. In other, more history-oriented graduate courses, the content is less visually-focused, but involves similar field trips. For an advanced American Studies course on Revolutionary and Early National America we undertook both the cemetery and the architecture field trips, prefaced by different readings than the art history course. Instead of articles in American art journals, students chose essays in *The William and Mary Quarterly* and *The Journal of the Early Republic.* By mid-semester, the group I taught in spring 2019, all but demanded that I bring in photocopies of relevant primary materials to every class. Period inventories, letters, and other documentary and artifactual evidence also helped prepare them to analyze a pre-selected document or object for their final project. Although this

class was mostly composed of majors and those in adjacent fields, they shared much with the American art class. Their positive responses to experiential learning showed in their day-to-day engagement, the quality of their work, and their evaluations. In both courses, the combination of lecture-like components and discussions provided an opportunity to grasp much of the meat of the course. The experiential aspects of the classes provided students with a variety of materials and techniques that enhanced their ability to engage with the course content and could be applied to future endeavors.