

The "Art" of Online Learning: Teaching Visual Art Virtually

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ABSTRACT

Taking an art course often makes many college students anxious. This could be attributed to the fact that students are unable to draw, and because they have not had any "art" since 8th grade or younger. If this is not enough to deter students from enrolling in an art course, try persuading them to take a distance education art course that is delivered entirely online. This article describes an online visual art course that is designed to overcome these fears and make learning an enjoyable virtual experience while developing critical thinking and working collaboratively with other students in the course. Qualitative data of students' evaluation of the course was collected and analyzed. Based on the findings, implications for the design of online courses, as well as for the teaching and learning of visual arts are provided.

KEY WORDS

Multimedia, Collaborative Learning, Visual Art

1. Introduction

The Internet has impacted the way we learn. More and more courses offered by institutions of higher education are delivered via the Internet. A recent survey by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found Web-based distance education to be the most widespread mode of distance delivery [1]. At least 58 percent of institutions which offered distance education used Web-based courses, compared to 54 percent that used two-way interactive video and 47 percent which used one-way pre-recorded video.

According to Eduventures, Inc., a leading independent research and consultancy firm that specializes in corporate, postsecondary and Pre K-12 learning markets, currently there are more than 350,000 students enrolled in completely online degree granting programs generating \$1.75 billion in tuition revenues for institutions in 2001/2002 [2]. Eduventures, Inc. estimates that the distance learning market for fully online degree programs is increasing at an annual rate of 45 percent. Because online distance education is a fast-growing area, it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of this mode of distance education delivery.

The advent of multimedia (images, audio and video) on the Web has made it possible to teach visual art in a virtual environment. However, little has been documented on the subject of teaching visual art online.

2. Background

This paper describes the strategies for teaching visual art in a virtual classroom that evolved from the development and design of the Introduction to the Visual Arts - Art 101 course at the Leeward Community College, Honolulu, Hawaii. Art 101 is a core course in Arts and Humanities and part of the A.A. and B.A. degrees. It is an Internet-based course delivered entirely online using the WebCT course management system.

The main goal of the Art 101 course is to provide students with the experience of visual language and communication. The objectives of the course are to provide knowledge of the visual elements, principles of design, and meanings of ordinary art term. Students are familiarized with the more common techniques and processes in the field of art and with significant examples of art throughout the world.

To this end, the focus is to make this Web-based course as interactive as possible and to allow for more student-to-student and student-to-course material interactions. Course content is delivered using multimedia with scanned images, audio and video to make learning visual art appealing and interesting to students in a virtual environment.

3. Theoretical Framework

The design and development of the Art 101 online course was based on a constructivist approach, which contends that students are active agents in the learning process, exploring, testing, and searching in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and ultimately personal meaning [3].

In Art 101, constructive learning is engaged learning in which collaborative team members work on activities to help them develop their visual skills. Emphasis is placed on team members communicating with each other. Students learn to plan, manage and develop social skills in their teams, which ultimately the workplace will demand. Collaboration helps students learn to clarify and verbalize images they see in the course. The diverse backgrounds of the students force them to become aware of multiple perspectives. The work students do in their teams focuses and reinforce course content. This breaks from the older models of computer-based learning which emphasized more individualized learning rather than stressing interactivity.

When students work in groups, learning becomes a social process mediated through discussion, clarification, argument, and persuasion. Together the members of the group build a shared understanding or solution through active negotiation.

Learning is context-dependent and acquired through experience and involvement in real-world situations [4]. Students in Art 101 learn in the context in which they will ultimately use the knowledge and skill rather than in the abstract, context-less environment typical of the traditional classroom.

4. Course Design & Strategies

One of the goals of any visual art course is to expose students to art. This course starts by exposing students to the subject matter of art from various cultures and very quickly the idea of being human and being related to the rest of the world is seen through the art.

Taking an art course makes many college students anxious. Common causes are that students are unable to draw, and also because they have not had any "art" since 8th grade or younger. This visual art course is designed to overcome these fears and make learning an enjoyable virtual experience while developing critical thinking and working collaboratively with other students enrolled in the course.

Interacting with artworks and building on using their eyes to really "see" images, the students are taken from just learning art terms to learning how to apply them to describe and dissect works of art in a global and art historical context. As a result, students' knowledge and awareness of the visual arts is expanded. The goal is to engage students in the process of their own appreciation and creativity.

The strategies employed to exposing students to visual art govern the way the course is structured. The course content is divided into four units to facilitate the chunking of information. Group collaboration is encouraged through the series of Art Views exercises that makes

students work together to develop critical thinking skills in interpreting artworks. Multimedia delivery of the course content is facilitated by the Slide Shows provided in the course. To reinforce context-dependent learning acquired through real-world experience, students are required to visit an art museum on their own and write a final paper. Finally, online quizzes are given to assess mastery of course content.

4.1 Units

The course is chunked into four Units. The first Unit introduces the nature and subject matter of art, presents the visual elements of art, the principles of design and style. This provides students with a foundation for developing critical thinking skills and for evaluation and criticism of art. Three Slide Shows (Subject Matter and Style, The Visual Element, and Media) provide the content for Unit I. Students work on Art View I in this unit.

Unit II introduces the media used in drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture and builds on the visual and verbal vocabulary. There are two Slide Shows (Sculpture and Architecture). In this unit, students work on Art View II.

Unit III covers art as cultural heritage. This unit reaches beyond the Western tradition and includes an examination of the arts of non-western traditions in order to provide a global perspective. Art is treated chronologically to show how art history relies heavily on its predecessors and past as it unfolds. Ten Slide Shows accompany Unit III. Students work on Art View III and Art View IV in this unit.

Unit IV consists of artistic developments of the modern Western world from the late eighteenth century to the present. During this unit students visit an art museum and see real artworks. This unit has the most number of Slide Shows (17 in total). In this final unit, students complete Art View V and write a paper on an art museum visit.

Each Unit has worksheets and exercises covering material which will be covered on each quiz.

4.2 Group Collaboration

Students are placed in random computer generated groups when they are registered for the course. Each group takes on the name of a famous artist. They are given 5 Art Views to do working within their group. Each group has between 3 and 5 students.

Art View I

Students are shown two paintings and must agree amongst themselves on names for the paintings as well as provide interpretations for the paintings. Students may choose to

communicate asynchronously through the Bulletin Board (WebCT's threaded discussion communication tool) or synchronously via the chat room. The instructor can monitor both the Bulletin Boards and the chat room. When this work is completed, the instructor provides feedback and reveals the actual names of the art works and provides an interpretation of the work.

Art View II

The purpose of Art View II is to get students to use the vocabulary of visual elements and principles of art to describe art works. They are shown two sculptures and asked to discuss the formal qualities of these works. After collaborating in their groups, a member of the group posts the final analysis on the Bulletin Board.

Art View III

Students are given directions on how to analyze, interpret and research art works. Each group decides which non-Western culture they would like to learn more about, and then chooses a single art work from within a Slide Show to write about. The papers that students submit must contain the following sections: description, analysis, interpretation, research, and evaluation.

Art View IV

Each group is assigned a particular period in art history such as Greek or Etruscan. Each student in the group must search for web sites related to that period, and decide on one which they consider a good resource of the rest of the class. The URLs of these web sites are then posted on the main Bulletin Board.

Art View V

The groups now research the artist whose name they have. They choose one work by the artist and write about the selected art work. As in Art View III, the papers must have the following sections: Description, Analysis, Interpretation, Research, and Evaluation.

4.3 Slide Shows

The pedagogical advantage of this online course is that it consistently gives examples and images to help students master the terminology of art. There is a total of 32 Slide Shows in the online course. This is to provide students with the widest range of experiencing art in a single place throughout the course.

All Slide Shows can be accessed at any time throughout the semester. Each Slide Show consists of scanned images put into a web page template and contains between 100 and 150 images and text. Each image can be enlarged for better viewing. The Slide Shows contain high quality images and reinforce the concepts of each unit. Some of the Slide Shows have audio, and a short video as well as hyperlinks to definitions of art terms and web sites that further elaborate on an artist or art form when available. To provide students with a more comprehensive idea of

an original work, multiple views of certain paintings or sculptures are shown. The Slide Shows have narratives that explain the images as well as maps and other supplementary material such as an explanation of Greek Mythology, etc.

The Slide Shows in Art 101 have many more images on any given subject than the textbook does. Although images used in the textbook are also employed in the Slide Shows, these images are explained in a different manner to help reinforce the elements and principles of art.

4.4 Art Museum Visit

The last paper in the course reinforces context-dependent learning acquired through experience in a real-world situation. Students visit an art museum and must write about one two-dimensional object and one three-dimensional object of their choice. This is done entirely on their own. They follow the same steps as they did with the paper done in their groups but must now apply their knowledge and skills on their own in an authentic art context. In one section of the paper, they must describe their experience at the museum and give an example of another work of art they liked but did not choose to analyze.

4.5 Assessment

Quizzes are given online. Each quiz consists of 50 questions and has at least 20-25 images. Students are asked questions about the images in a multiple-choice format. There are also matching questions and other multiple-choice questions without images. A student may take the quizzes any time within a specified time period. However, they must complete the test in one sitting. Each quiz is designed to generally take about an hour. However, students may take as long as they want to complete the quiz.

5. Results & Implications

Art 101 has been taught online for two semesters (Fall 2001 and Spring 2002). A total of 132 students have taken Art 101 online. At the end of each course, students were asked to complete an online course evaluation survey consisting of 15 open-ended course-related questions.

While analysis is preliminary at this stage, several trends have emerged, and there are implications for the design on online courses, as well as for the teaching and learning of visual arts.

Generally, the Art 101 online course was effective in stimulating small-group discussion and supporting peer learning. The students became engrossed in their online

interactions. Overall, the students responded positively to the course.

Students found the Slide Shows to be a useful learning tool. Some students' comments included:

"...the slideshows were a great and interesting way to learn about all the different works. It also allowed us to get better view of the art work close up."

"I really felt that the slide shows were effective. It was like having an art museum in my own computer."

"The slide show was a positive source for additional examples of the work being studied, and provided substantial reinforcement..."

"I found that the slide show was very helpful. Also the text included with each picture was a great feature so that students were able to gain a better understanding of the meaning and the elements and principles of art that each artist included in their pieces."

"Being able to see art works other than our book made the learning more interesting. Being able to enlarge the pictures was also a good feature."

Students may find it challenging to adapt to an online environment that is predominantly text-based. Using multimedia, such as these Slide Shows, will enhance the learning experience of auditory and visual learners. Incorporating multimedia (text, images, audio and video) provides greater opportunities to deliver an enriched learning environment to online students.

The students reported using the Bulletin Board most frequently during the course to communicate and collaborate on their assignments with their classmates. Students commented that the bulletin board:

"...was the easiest way for my group and I to keep in touch and share information for our art views."

"... was the main connection between my group members and I as well as where I would go to for help and information about the class."

"...was the most effective way of communication between the group members so that we could finish our art views on a timely basis."

To develop critical thinking and working collaboratively with other students, online instructors should incorporate cooperative and collaborative learning activities, such as the Art Views exercise in this course. Collaborating on projects allows students to bring different perspectives and ways of thinking into the group. Furthermore, carefully planned collaborative learning activities create the feeling of a "true" class or group of people learning

together rather than the feeling of isolation that many online students report [5].

The other tool that the students used frequently to communicate and collaborate was another asynchronous tool, electronic mail (email). Students also found it convenient to be able to communicate with the instructor via email. In addition, students felt that the instructor responded in a timely manner either via email or the bulletin board.

Timely feedback from instructors is very important in online courses. In their study on students' frustration with online courses, Hara and Kling found a lack of immediate feedback from the instructor and ambiguous instructions to be main causes of students' frustration [6].

Students did not use the chat function as much as email and the bulletin board as the synchronous nature of the chat function required them to "meet" in real-time:

"...It was difficult to get everyone on a time schedule, so we found it easier to just use the bulletin board."

"We all had different schedules and were unable to find times we could all meet. The bulletin board was much more convenient."

"Distance learning is mainly for people that have unconventional schedules. It is hard to get everyone together at the same time to chat."

Overall, students found the Art 101 online course to be a positive learning experience because the asynchronous nature of the course allowed students to work on the course from anywhere and at any time.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have several implications for the design of online courses, as well as for the teaching and learning of visual arts. When developing online courses, instructors should: 1) enhance the online learning experience through multimedia delivery; 2) incorporate collaborative and cooperative learning activities to promote critical thinking and peer learning; 3) provide online students with timely feedback; and 4) design for asynchronous interactions instead of synchronous interactions for the convenience of the students.

Most people do not immediately think that an art course can be taught online. However, the way in which this visual art course has been designed demonstrates the potential of the virtual environment to successfully make learning a positive and enjoyable experience while developing critical thinking and collaborative learning skills.

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