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Backwards by Design Implementation Report

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Course in Question: **A/HI 275: Introduction to Writing and Critical Thinking**

As part of my participation in the Backwards by Design Retreat during summer of 2012, I chose to design the first course of the three-part series of courses on writing required for the Art History Major. A/HI 271: Introduction to Writing and Critical Thinking is also a GUR.

My goal overarching goal was to implement the idea of a threshold concept within the course, and during the retreat I identified that concept as:

In academic writing, well-grounded claims are understood to emerge out of evidence, but in art historical writing, as in any interpretive writing, it is essential to understand that the frames of reference one brings to the analysis will change the kinds of claims that can be discovered.

In service of this threshold concept I developed two course objectives which answered the question: What do we want students to know/do/believe by the end of the course? These course objectives were:

- That students become self-reflective about how they look at art. Specifically, that they understand that the framework they bring to their looking at art changes what they can see and think about that art.
- That students begin to develop skill in the deployment of different lenses for the examination of art in the service of their different desired analytic outcomes.

In service of these course objectives, I also developed a set of five learning outcomes or skills which were necessary to achieve these objectives. I called this set of outcomes “The Toolbox” and it included:

- That students become proficient at writing both descriptive and analytic passages of art works
- That students understand the different categories of description and how they might frame analytic thinking
- That students are familiar with several veins of analysis within art history
- That students understand how their own analyses put them into dialog with other authors working in similar veins
- That students become proficient at accurately and appropriately citing other authors.

Finally, I developed tripartite organization for the quarter breaking it up thematically into modules focused on Description/Seeing, Analysis/Reading and finally

Critique/Discourse. This organization yielded a series weekly lesson plans to teach the component of this Toolbox.

For this write up I will evaluate a series of experimental exercises developed during the Backwards by Design retreat to help make “categories of description” less abstract. The four steps involved in these exercises are below:

1. Writing Exercise—Looking at *La Meninas* again, free write describing about it what you believe would appropriately fit into a “one-inch” picture frame
2. In Class Activity: Classify the descriptions we wrote in class as a group. Using the professor’s example from the free write on *La Meninas*. Ask who wrote a similar description? Who wrote a different description? What kinds of things am I describing? (form, technique, composition, history, iconography, style) What words would we use to categorize this description ...composition, color, content, manufacture? Ask what frame did I use?
3. Break up into groups of 3 and read each other’s work. Help classify each other’s descriptions. What is the piece about? What was the 1” picture frame? Did the author write about objects or ideas? What categories are being used? Come up with a one-sentence title for the description that expresses an idea the description might be used to support.
4. Share these titles with each other and discuss how the student writing might be sorted into similar categories

The goal of this series of exercises was for students to extend their understanding of the “1-inch frame” as a means to focus their writing by discovering that their descriptions already contained an analytic point of view. The goal would have been achieved had students realized an alignment between their beginning point and outcome, but this didn’t happen. The student writing tended to remain unfocused at this stage—the initial frames being arbitrarily chosen rather than being evolved from points of interest. In short this exercise occurred too early.

Instead, the point where students began to understand the link between description and analysis occurred when examples like Robbe-Grillet and Carlos Williams were introduced. These examples allowed students to discover the analytic agendas which lay beneath these putatively descriptive works. Only after uniting these examples with Baxandall’s theories about “Language and Explanation” did the link between description and analysis fall into place for students. By emulating the writing styles of Robbe-Grillet and Carlos Williams, students seemed to be able to focus their writing on an area of interest rather than just moving haphazardly around the painting. In the end the emulation exercised achieved better than working directly from the idea of ekphrasis to categorization.

As a result, I think the first third of the class simply requires some reordering. Next year I will move the Carlos Williams and Robbe Grillet exercises to follow directly after the Lemott exercise. This will be followed by Baxandall before we talk more abstractly about the relationship between description and analysis in Art History using Hunt, Maguire, Kouwenhoven and finally Elsner. This new order should provide a better foundation for the course before we pivot to the analytic module.