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**Scaffolding Writing Assignments in Introductory Art History: Backward by Design
Mini-Study for A/Hi 275, “Introduction to Writing and Critical Thinking,” Fall 2017**
By Monique Kerman, Assistant Professor, Art and Art History Department

In August 2017, I participated in WWU’s Backward by Design retreat with the intention of revising my A/Hi 275 syllabus. A/Hi 275, “Introduction to Writing and Critical Thinking,” is an introductory level art history course designed as the first in a sequence of three courses for Art History majors. This course is an introduction to the visual analytical skills and writing within the discipline of art history, as well as an exploration of art history as a profession. It is a challenging course because it is fairly theoretical and writing intensive, yet meant for students with minimal to no previous art history experience. The only prerequisite is ENG 101. Having taught the course in Winter and then Fall 2016, I was eager to modify the written assignments in order to better prepare students working towards a lengthy research paper. In course evaluations and anecdotally, students reported being intimidated by the size and scope of the final paper, and asked for more writing practice.

During the workshop, I was intrigued by the concept of “scaffolding” a larger assignment into smaller, more manageable (and low stakes) assignments, and the idea that these could progressively build up students’ writing skills towards a long research paper. I proceeded to list various types of writing that art historians do, such as visual analysis, book reviews, annotated bibliographies, and presentations. Because one of the course’s key objectives is to explore art history as a profession, I decided that offering students differing kinds of art history writing for specific contexts would give them a broader sense of the scope of the discipline. I was also influenced by the workshop’s presentation of the characteristics of effective writing assignments, which should have interactive components, a meaningful (or, to quote the handout, “meaning-constructing”) task, and clear expectations. I realized how I might create assignments based on these criteria that could provide a variety of writing experience, and better engage my students in the process. For example, using the College Art Association’s book review template as a guide, I could provide clear explanations of the expectations, standard in the discipline, for that particular assignment. I also conceived of a role-playing exercise in which students would pitch an exhibition proposal to a fictitious museum director and present their proposal in class, via a PowerPoint that provided gallery wall texts and labels, as well as images of objects in the show. I decided that instead of requiring a high stakes research paper as the culmination of the coursework, I would scaffold assignments throughout the course that would eventually lead students to composing a thesis around which they could curate their virtual exhibition. I collaborated with my colleague who teaches the subsequent course in the series, and she felt that this work towards a thesis was a wonderfully appropriate place for her to pick up with the students in A/Hi 375, when they write and present lengthy research papers.

My new assignment series included the following:

- Visual analysis paper (learning how to describe and analyze works of art in writing)
- Book review (based on industry standards as determined by the College Art Association)
- Annotated bibliography (which includes reflective writing about each source)

- Exhibit proposal draft peer reviews
- Exhibit proposal presentations

Each assignment was worth 20% of the student's overall grade, with class participation worth another 20%. Thus the value of assignments was distributed evenly instead of weighted heavily on one high stakes research paper. In aggregating all students' scores from Fall 2017, students earned an average of 89.6% on these writing assignments. This is in comparison to Fall 2016 scores from the course before the revisions, when students earned an average of 85.5% on writing-based assignments. So in terms of performance, students definitely achieved higher levels of success in the revised course.

I was especially interested in the course evaluations for feedback from students about the old writing instruction in the course versus new, post-BbD revised assignments. Within the standardized responses, every single metric measured higher in Fall 2017 than 2016. Specifically, students reported that "Encouragement of student self-expression" was 4.63 out of 5 in 2017, from 4.33. "Challenge level of assigned work" went to 4.37 from 4.00. "Relevancy of course content in terms of the field" went to 4.32 from 4.20. These are certainly satisfying gains in significant aspects of the course, although the student comments were even more gratifying. One student in the Fall 2017 course wrote, "I liked the readings and the assignments [;] they helped show a different perspective to the art history major besides writing long papers. The whole course was very helpful." Another wrote, "I felt like the assignments were very relevant to the field and challenged my skills." Another "loved the encouragement to be creative with fairly versatile projects for what can be a[n] overwhelming subject." These comments compare favorably to some of the critiques from the previous class in Fall 2016. One student wrote that, "Professor Kerman was very nice; however, we rarely discussed our paper which is the majority of our grade. I know multiple students seemed very confused and concerned regarding that. Our discussions and readings, although very interesting, seemed disconnected to our writing assignment." Another regretted that, "Guidance for assignments was not very clear." Naturally there were a range of comments from students of both classes, but these comments demonstrate specific ways that the revised course is much more effective and enjoyable for students.

I am proud of what I accomplished in the Backward by Design retreat and am confident in my improvements made in writing instruction as a result of this experience. I will continue to teach the revised A/Hi 275 course annually and, considering the success I have enjoyed with this newly revised course, I will continue to employ the scaffolding method as I have done here. I will likely implement similar teaching strategies in my other courses going forward.