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Multimodal Research for Digital Art

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In my application for the CELT Teaching Innovation Institute (TII), my intention was to continue to develop as a teacher and to enhance the learning experiences of my students. Specifically, my goals included developing more ways for my students to directly engage with each other and facilitating improved discussions about diversity. In a Digital Art class, where artmaking is often a solo endeavor, finding ways for students to socially construct their knowledge was a priority. I wanted to find innovative ways to bridge the learning gap in the range of my students' existing skill sets. I hoped to find fluid ways for the work to be streamlined and accessible for students anywhere that they might have their iPad and an internet connection. I also wanted to improve on the discussion of diversity, and possibly develop a new assignment and/or components of existing assignments that would create an open conversation or collaborative environment that would help students engage and understand one another, creating a more meaningful learning experience. With the required changes due to COVID-19, I had to rethink many things, including how I wanted to approach my TII pedagogical goals.

Rethinking Assignment Design During COVID-19

These pedagogical changes connected to my TII goals were set to take place during the fall 2020 semester, a time when I was teaching online only. For my participation in this cohort, these newly required interaction and delivery methods were both challenging and fortuitous, as I was able to use technology to our advantage and deliver multimodal curricular content for my Digital Art classes. In fact, online teaching required me to execute the goal of streamlining the content for easy access. I created multiple tutorial videos for technical instruction. This was advantageous for students as they could go back and reference the instructions at any time. In the class survey, many of the students made positive statements about the tutorials being a great addition to the learning environment. Moving forward, when I teach live in the classroom again, I will keep these video tutorials as part of my library of assets for the students.

I have been teaching the Digital Art class since 2012. The class itself has undergone changes to the title and to the curriculum, removing time-based media capture and editing skills from the learning objectives. Over this span of time, I initiated ongoing changes to improve the curriculum each semester. One of the major projects, Ominous Landscape, is an assignment where students take on a social issue that they represent visually. This assignment sparks student interest and curiosity in the overall subject of contemporary social issues, increases their personal investment in their self-chosen specific subject matter, advances their conceptual higher thinking skills, as well as develops their technical proficiency in Photoshop. When rethinking the assignment for TII, I wanted students to dig deeper into research, as well as engage in discussions with one another, which would not only hopefully improve their creative work, but also help them to connect to other humans with different or even opposing ideas. I wanted to strive for more collaborative and constructivist, student-centered learning experiences. To execute these methods, the students spent more time on multimodal research assignments, both individual and in small groups, leading up to the actual artmaking.

Encouraging Conversation Between Students

Assignment instructions and much of the content were delivered via Canvas in learning modules. It is part of my duty as a teacher to help encourage and instill some personal communication skills in my classroom. Thus, to begin, in class we started the research with a group project using Padlet to collaboratively discuss social issues. After creating an account where they were recognized by name, each student posted a photo or gif that represented a social issue that they cared about, along with a statement as to why they chose that issue. They then had to rate each other's posts (anonymously), draw links between related issues and comment on/respond to at least three other students' posts. We then had a live Zoom open group discussion, with each person speaking briefly about their post. Often several students engaged one another about an issue they had chosen as a main interest, or

even how their interests were connected. This synchronous, in-class exercise encouraged them to speak about what they care about while also hearing a variety of interests and points of view. I think one of the challenges our students face is that they rarely listen to others or value their perspectives—a skill that is certainly lacking in the real world. This assignment sought specifically to encourage that process and humanize others and their perspectives.

One of the best ways to learn about art is to spend time looking at it, and to ask questions about what one sees while trying to understand and evaluate the work. The next two steps of our research process used two different modes for the students to engage with art and real-world examples. The first was digital video delivery with a homework assignment to look at other artists who were making work about social issues. In their own time, the students watched the episode “Protest” of the PBS show *art21* and wrote a reflection response about the featured artists and their work. These first two aforementioned assignments prepared the students for the following in-class research assignment, looking at art in person.

During the next class they visited the UK Art Museum, where it was especially serendipitous that the exhibition, “This is America,” was about current social issues. In their museum visit they viewed art on their own, then convened in small groups (socially distanced) to discuss their favorite pieces in the exhibition. Because this assignment was in person, it was voluntary. All of the students participated except for a few who were not able to because of physical distance or COVID-19 concerns (those students received an alternative assignment with images of the exhibited work). After the museum visit and peer discussion, students wrote an informal reflection about their overall experience, the artistic qualities of the work, and the reasons they chose the work that they discussed with peers. Not only did this assignment provide both looking at and discussing art for the students, but it executed one of my TII goals of direct student engagement. When we all came back together on Zoom for the next synchronous class meeting, we discussed as a class the exhibition and its most compelling works. The conversation was especially rewarding as students practiced personal expression about the world as well as being descriptive about art, visual interpretation, and using the artistic voice. At the end of that class the students were tasked with doing their own research about an issue on which they would create Digital Art.

The weekend module was to do research about their chosen social issue. In this writing they were tasked with discussing why they wanted to make creative work about that issue, as well as developing a statement of intent for the visual work. They also had to provide three articles, two in support of their position and one in opposition. After that research they had ten days (three class periods) of individual work time to develop their visual content before a mid-critique evaluation. During that creative time, they had another inspirational module and written reflection where the students viewed a set of artists’ videos that I procured from Ted Talks. The mid-critique had students broken up into small groups for more personal written feedback. They then had one-on-one time with me to discuss their conceptual creative work and their Photoshop challenges and successes.

After the mid-critique, the students then had two weeks to revise and finish their final Ominous Landscape projects. During those two weeks we used class time synchronously as I checked in with the group and with each student to discuss their art and any technical issues they might have or

challenges with or visuals that they wanted to accomplish but didn't know how. For our final critique, I integrated an active learning module that involved small group and large group engagement in relation to the creative assignment. That critique included small group written feedback via Canvas discussion boards for the first 30 minutes, then a full group session while viewing and commenting on the final pieces. Ultimately this project is an inquiry based pedagogical approach where a student takes on a real-world problem, and with their creative voice they try to express potential solutions or raise awareness. Art is often most powerful when the artist has a personal connection to the work. Students self-selected subject matter that is important to them, thus had a special investment in using their artistic voice. You can see their work here: <https://lapayn2uky.myportfolio.com/>

Benefits of the Multimodal Research Assignment

In my TII successes, I enhanced the multimodal learning experience of the students by updating the content of several existing modules, as well as creating several new modules that challenge their conceptual and higher order thinking skills in a participatory online environment. I created a group of video tutorials that increased students' technical proficiency as well as bridged the skill level learning gap that I see in every class. Using mostly synchronous classes, I was able to have them engage with one another both virtually and in person by creating and/or changing assignments that required more direct discussion. Another assignment that worked particularly well for teaching online only required one-on-one meetings. My students were assigned 10- to 15-minute Zoom meetings with me four or five times over the semester. I was able to check in with them, and it gave them a private window outside of class to ask questions and raise concerns etc. Many of them expressed their appreciation for that time both directly to me and in the class survey.

My participation in TII most certainly helped me learn new innovative ways to engage the students and have them engage each other. It also helped me develop as an instructor by introducing me to new technology, some of which I used during the semester of my implementation, and some of which I hold in my back pocket moving forward for use in other classes as well. I am incredibly appreciative of CELT and their innovative thinking about pedagogy and technology, and their constant striving to improve our learning environments.

Media

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