LEARNER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN DISTANCE LEARNING: MAKING OPTIMAL USE OF DISCUSSION BOARDS IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (ART HISTORY) COURSES

Anahit Ter-Stepanian
Southern Connecticut State University
New Haven, CT, USA
terstepania1@southernct.edu

Abstract

The paper introduces the concept of Engaged Learning Environment, which is achieved through personalized learning experience involving life situations. The paper summarizes the most effective approaches taken to establishing group discussions in asynchronous online art history courses, discusses learner engagement strategies in the eLearning environment, describes best practices for the optimal use of discussion boards, analyzes the effects of role playing in online discussion environments, and compares different types of assignments and their learning outcomes. The analysis provides case studies to support this argument, drawing on examples from over sixty online undergraduate art history modules taught over the last eight years using Virtual Learning Environments.

Keywords - Distance learning, art history, Engaged Learning Environment

1 THE ADAPTATION OF ART HISTORY COURSES TO ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Distance learning poses new problems for instructors; it changes the traditional understanding of instructional design. The adaptation of traditional, face-to-face courses to online format presents both challenges and opportunities; it also entails redefining pedagogical issues such as material delivery, requirements, assignments, discussions, and evaluation.

An online teaching format presents a new stage in the evolution of teacher-student relationship. Throughout ancient and medieval times the relationship between the master and apprentice was limited to student-teacher connection; the teacher was the mentor and the main source of information. Since the Renaissance, in post-Gutenberg period, teacher-printed book-student relationship evolved. In this sense the teacher was still an important agent in dissemination of knowledge, but not the sole source of information. The modern-day online setting results in almost complete exclusion of the teacher as a source of information and knowledge resulting in a relationship that is more complex and does not involve a direct teacher-student component. Instead, the teacher-computer-student-printed text model takes place. We will still see psychologists and sociologists getting involved in this model, but more urgent are the pedagogical aspects of distance learning. In face-to-face settings the personality of the teacher plays an important role. In an online environment the impersonal virtual character of instructor-student interaction results in more demanding requirements for instructional design. How does the teacher maintain that 'life-changing' role of a unique, unforgettable figure in the life of each student in this new setting? Being the mysterious, completely impersonal mentor, how does the online instructor sustain student's desired level of enthusiasm for the subject in the process of learning? How does one create a feeling of comfort which is such an integral part of the mentor’s role in any type of relationship involving gaining new knowledge and mastering the essentials of a new discipline?

There is a definite gap between clarification of technical aspects of online teaching and discussion of fundamental pedagogical problems pertaining to specific disciplines. While the technical and technological aspects of online teaching are commonly addressed in many publications and training courses, the pedagogical aspects of online teaching are more often left to individual instructors' intuition. It is safe to state that mastering the technical challenges of distance learning is easier than overcoming the problems resulting from new relationships between students and the teacher. The following discussion focuses on how to foster an Engaging Learning Environment.

While every course needs serious rethinking when offered online, the adaptation of art history courses to online environment is particularly problematic because of the nature of art history instruction. An abundance of visual material, discussion-intensive (rather than informative) knowledge gaining, and context-based viewing of art historical material constitute the essence of traditional art history
instruction. Assessment methods and testing in face-to-face art history courses heavily rely on student's physical presence in the classroom. Included in such methods are slide recognition, knowledge of material through multiple-choice or short answer testing, style recognition of unknown artworks, and compare-and-contrast type short essays. An important area of knowledge of the student’s assessment is the recognition of artworks. Some instructors place an important emphasis on slide recognition, assigning up to 70% of the test grade to student’s knowledge of titles, authors and styles for works of art which are displayed on the screen during exams. It is not unusual for an art instructor to display up to 30–40 slides during tests, requiring students to memorize and recognize the artworks for covered periods of art history. Naturally, this type of assessment loses any importance in an online, open-book environment. In higher-level art history courses instructors commonly require students to know additional facts about displayed artworks, including the importance of the work for the development of the style, or any characteristic features or qualities associated with the artwork. Testing of this type of knowledge becomes completely obsolete in an online environment. Such matters are particularly pertinent when both instruction and testing are administered in a completely online environment.

In online open-book testing, assessment methods have to be rethought to suit the virtual environment, as well as to guarantee the effective and adequate evaluation of the students’ command of the material. When slide recognition, a strong instrument in student assessment in traditional environment, can’t be used, the emphasis in testing is placed on factual and analytical knowledge. Designing chapter tests with a number of multiple-choice, fill in blank, or open ended questions is effective or only to a degree; compare-and-contrast type questions asking for a paragraph-long answer provide a somewhat objective picture of students’ ability to analyze a work of art, draw parallels between works, or reveal similarities and differences. All these types of questions are widely used in online testing. Learning environments most commonly used today in higher education institutions (BlackBoard, WebCT/Vista) provide functionality for timed tests. When a timed test has to be completed in one sitting, the student most probably will read the entire chapter and posted materials before starting the assessment, but even the strictest time restraints cannot prevent the student from looking up information using the Internet or the textbook itself. It only takes seconds for him to find any information for an art history test questions. To add to this, there are institutions which use their own in-house online environments, and some of these platforms do not provide any functionality for timed test. One of the four colleges, where the author teaches art history courses online, uses software which does not provide automated or timed testing functionality. When that is the case, how does the instructor make sure that the student gains any knowledge of the material or grasps essential concepts? Even this short overview shows that art history instructors face greater challenges than instructors of other disciplines. After all, a math problem is a math problem, and solving it requires more or less the same skills from a student, whether in the classroom or at home.

Assessment challenges are not the only problematic area in adapting art history courses to online environments. A big part of learning of art historical material is the critical analysis of individual artworks, artists and even entire periods or styles of art. Just learning art historical material (reading the chapter and memorizing the key facts or events) is not sufficient for understanding of art history. Art history, more than any other area, involves critical thinking. In-class discussions, when students express their own ideas about works of art, suggest different “readings” of the same painting or sculpture, are a vital part of traditional instruction. It is during these discussions that students learn how to connect the artworks with historical and religious realities of the society, how to see signs of the artist’s own feelings in his or her art, how to encounter for particular trends of the society (tastes, aesthetic preferences). Political, religious, gender, and historical issues are often addressed during these in-class discussions. To explain the key concepts for each portion of the covered material the instructor has to facilitate and lead balanced and open criticism of the artwork. In an online environment, when most of the knowledge is gained through reading (albeit from diverse sources), the student might feel the lack of direct instruction and suffer from the mere fact of an independent one-on-one struggle with the abundance of often contradictory interpretations and “readings” available. Fostering critical thinking and an understanding of the vital aspects of the material, therefore, become the primary goal of online instructional design.

While incorporating timed tests into an art history course may be viewed as a more or less effective measure to secure students’ basic familiarity with the material, other types of assessment should also be used. Students can more effectively demonstrate their in-depth understanding of the social, political, and religious conditions of respective time periods by viewing the artwork within its complex relationships with these conditions in their discussion board postings. In their detailed discussions students have a chance to better demonstrate their knowledge of the key concepts, present in-depth analyses of paintings, sculptures and architectural buildings, address painting techniques, discuss the role of commissioners of works of art, and confer about advantages of different building techniques (structural systems and elements, building materials, advances in building technologies). Discussion board postings, therefore, may also serve as effective assessment tools. Not only can critical thinking be encouraged and facilitated by introducing challenging and intriguing topics in group discussions and blogs, but the specific nature of online communication provides a unique and positive atmosphere for discussion. Anonymity fosters participation among students who are less fond of public speaking, schedule flexibility means students can do research before posting to discussion boards, a lack of time constraints means discussions do not have to ‘end’ when ‘class’ is over, and the variety of available
tools means students can incorporate images, audio and video clips, and graphics into their analytical reflections. Discussions can ensure active participation of every student; in a face-to-face classroom it is almost impossible to make every student to participate, there are a few 'vocal' students who readily share their insights and 'quiet' ones who rarely feel comfortable to contribute to discussions.

The main tool in online instructional design, particularly in art history courses, therefore, remains the maximum and optimal use of discussion board or message board functionality. Discussion board assignments are also instrumental in creating a collaborative learning environment in an online class. One of the disadvantages of asynchronous online art history courses is the lack of group communication involving instructors and students. Creating collaborative student group discussions in which students can usefully exchange ideas is therefore one of the most central aspects of distance learning instructional design. While the task of creating collaborative learning environments using discussion boards and blogs is applicable to all disciplines taught in online setting, we'll focus on how the opportunities provided by discussion boards can motivate art history learners through specifically designed assignments.

2 CREATING AN ENGAGED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Advantages and disadvantages of discussion forums are well documented in research studies. Two of the major strengths of message boards are emphasized in professional research [1]. Discussion forums, first and foremost, serve as a public space for building community; they also may be used for promotion of thoughtful, in-depth reflection, and knowledge construction through group interaction and idea sharing. If the former functionality of discussion forums is more or less discipline-independent, the latter functionality requires careful analysis of the ways in which to promote effective knowledge construction pertaining to the discipline. It is the instructor's responsibility to turn weekly postings into challenging, intriguing activities and intellectually stimulating assignments. Having employed a wide range of discussion topics over my eight years of online art history teaching, I have come to believe that that the more 'personal' the assignments are in character, the higher quality are the student responses. Personalized topics attract students' attention; they motivate students to look closer into the issue, to do additional research, and even to present their creative side. Based on the learning outcomes of sixty online modules taught over the last eight years I have concluded that Engaged Learning Environment is the key to a successful online course. Creation of an Engaged Learning Environment is possible through personalization of the components of an online course. Personalization means making connections to students' lives, displaying interest in their needs and interests and even their personal stories. In a virtual classroom, where face-to-face interaction is excluded, extra measures taken to create more 'personal' interaction contribute to student success.

Discussions board is instrumental in the creation of an Engaged Learning Environment. Both of the above-mentioned components of the discussions forums – social interaction and knowledge construction, are essential for the creation of an Engaged Learning Environment. The social aspect in Engaged Learning Environment involves establishing of a more personal approach between the students and the instructor. It affects both student-student and student-instructor relationships. The knowledge building aspect involves rethinking of assignments and making them more connected with life situations. Both areas of the Discussion Board are the key components of an Engaged Learning Environment. Each of these components is discussed in detail below.

2.1 Discussion Board as a Social Space in an Engaged Learning Environment

The collaborative aspect of discussion boards is addressed in many research studies dedicated to the tools used in distance learning. In this section some additional features are listed that are critical for an Engaged Learning Environment. An Engaged Learning Environment assumes a more personal instructor-student and student-student interaction.

It might seem strange but the instructor has a better chance to know the students in an online environment than in a traditional classroom. In an anonymous online environment students are willing to communicate, whereas in a face-to-face classroom students are more likely to maintain their privacy. To create an Engaged Learning Environment from the very first day the instructor may "suggest" that students talk about their interests and expectations. In a separate forum for introductions students get to meet each other, share their stories, hobbies, and talk about their families and their career goals. Because distance learning may sometimes cause fear, students feel more comfortable if they are able "to break the ice" and feel that they are not alone in their fear. The instructor's role in this initial stage is to greet each student individually, encourage student-to-student conversations, focus on student’s anticipated success and create a friendly atmosphere. Emphasis on collaboration rather than competition decreases student anxiety. Rules of netiquette provide the tone for future constructive rather than destructive interaction among students and the instructor. The instructor establishes guidelines for students' virtual attendance, emailing, assignment submission, etc. Initial introduction in art history online modules also may help the instructor to get a feeling of the
Several techniques prove to be effective, including role playing and modeling of real situations. These may be designed in such a way as to stimulate active learning by causing curiosity and intensive inquiry. In an online course, in order to motivate art history students, discussion board assignments must be effective in creating an Engaged Learning Environment in online art history courses. An online course can be reached by posing challenging questions [3]. Some of the elements of Keller’s model prove to be important in order to attract students’ attention and stimulate their curiosity. Attention arousal is an important factor in the motivational design of courses, as it is crucial in the process of grabbing the learner’s interest in the subject matter. According to Keller’s model of motivational design, among the methods for grabbing the learner’s attention are games and role playing, humor, and inquiry. Inquiry arousal stimulates curiosity, which is an important factor in the motivational design of courses. To stimulate active learning, the assignments should be designed to meet the needs of all the students, but the instructor should be familiar with the students’ needs in order to be able to engage students with different degrees of interest and previous exposure to the subject.

Peer-to-peer information sharing also contributes to the creation of an Engaged Learning Environment. A separate discussion forum without any course-related name is used by students to feel connected with their peers. This forum may be called “Chat room” or “Tea room” and is intended for all types of questions that are not related to particular material. The message exchange is mostly between the students; it replaces the talk that takes place in every classroom before the class starts and the instructor enters the room. In contrast with the Chat room functionally of Virtual Learning Environments it is asynchronous and doesn’t require simultaneous virtual presence of students to communicate. Students discuss a wide range of issues here, from the prices of used textbooks on the Internet, availability of textbooks in the campus bookstore, email problems, problems with opening the lecture notes. Sometimes students discuss the due dates of various assignments; even the clearest and well structured syllabus may cause confusion among student and they feel comfortable asking the instructor and/or their peers a variety of questions related to the syllabus. Because the conversations are monitored, many questions requiring instructor’s input may be cleared here. The emphasis, though, should be placed on encouraging students’ interest in the subject matter of the course. If the students find interesting material on the subject matter they are welcomed to post links, video clips, and other types of information pertaining to course materials. In art history courses students get an opportunity to share their findings related to covered material and often “dig” amazing information about art historical artifacts and discuss their opinions. The scope of information students share in the “Tea room” forum is broad – from new archaeological findings to auctions of paintings. Students feel that they are part of the course construction process and take great pride in doing so, and, most importantly, they come to realize that art history is not limited to the material in the textbook; it is a developing, living discipline.

Moral support is important in an Engaged Learning Environment as well. Most of the students are very supportive when it comes to posting replies to their peers’ discussions. In eight years of online teaching there were no cases of insults or of distrust among online students. On the contrary, I have witnessed many cases when students with similar personal problems provide extra-curricular moral support; this is especially true in classes with predominantly adult learners. As a result the sense of community and collaborative environment is created.

2.2 Building Knowledge through Discussion Board in an Engaged Learning Environment

The knowledge building role of discussion board postings has been acknowledged in research on distance learning. Garrison, Anderson and Archer describe this category as “cognitive presence” [2]. Through carefully designed discussion forum assignments the art history instructor can encourage the students to display their knowledge of social, historical, religious conditions of the societies which produced specific works of art. Students introduce factual and conceptual knowledge into their discussions, look for additional information, carry research on their own, and find data to support their arguments.

As in the case of collaborative social role of the discussion boards discussed above, personal character of interaction may result in a higher student involvement and motivation. At the first glance, personalization of online class interaction is difficult to combine with knowledge building, but, as the examples from student work demonstrate, placing students into the historical and cultural environment and designing student-centered assignments result in motivation and enthusiasm for the subject.

3 Types of Assignments and Their Learning Outcomes

According to Keller’s model of motivational design among the methods for grabbing the learner’s attention are games and role playing, humor, and inquiry. Inquiry arousal stimulates curiosity, which can be reached by posing challenging questions [3]. Some of the elements of Keller’s model prove to be effective in creation of an Engaged Learning Environment in online art history courses. An online course, in order to motivate art history students, must include discussion board assignments which may be designed in such way as to stimulate active learning by causing curiosity and intensive inquiry. Several techniques prove to be effective, including role playing and modeling of real situation. The
following examples demonstrate that by slightly modifying the tasks and avoiding impersonal “describe, discuss, analyze” and replacing them with imaginative scenarios where the student is “placed” in the social and historical context the learning outcomes may be drastically improved. If the topic allows the students to use their imagination and sense of humor, they are increasingly motivated to write detailed and thorough discussions and to display their knowledge of the art related aspects of the society and the cultural environment.

There are other definite advantages in assigning personalized topics as well. Specific assignments also discourage plagiarism. If the assignment asks for a description of an existing funerary complex in ancient Egypt the student might be tempted to find a description on the Internet and copy and paste it into his discussion board posting. With average number of four to five hundred postings per semester it is impossible for an online instructor to check every posting for possible plagiarism. Personalization of assignment topics makes it an impossible task for a student to find a readily available text anywhere and submit it as his or her own writing. Considering the growing concern for academic plagiarism this aspect of an Engaged Learning Environment is a valuable feature to take into account.

Another important advantage of personalized assignments is the enhancement of written communication skills. Motivated students are more likely to write lengthy responses to assigned topics. In a traditional foundation level art history course each student writes two or three small essays, usually under 200 words each, as part of in-class tests, with a total of 600 - 800 words during the semester. A typical writing intensive higher-level course calls for three writing assignments totaling 5000 words. In an online environment, because oral communication is replaced with a written one, extensive writing takes place. It is commonplace for a student enrolled in a foundation level art history course to write over 5000 words during the semester.

The following examples from foundation level two-semester art history survey courses (Art History I and Art History II) demonstrate how personalization of the assignments and placing the student into the imaginary situations within a respective cultural environment enhances student replies and motivates them to conduct additional research.

3.1 Assignment on Egyptian Art

The objective of the discussion forum: the student needs to get better understanding of the funerary art in ancient Egypt. Desired learning outcomes include demonstrating an understanding of the social and political conditions of ancient Egypt, the role of the afterlife in the society, the architectural elements of Egyptian funerary complexes and temples, correct implementation of art and architectural vocabulary. In the first few years this assignment was formulated in the following words: “Choose a funerary complex and describe its compositional and architectural characteristics, compare architectural features of pyramids and rock-cut funerary complexes.” Resulting responses included several general statements. Obviously the students were not motivated for the assignment was not intriguing enough. Later the students were given a more personalized topic, “Suggest your own original design of a funerary complex, either for yourself, or for your pharaoh. Choose between a pyramid and a rock-cut funerary complex.” This modified assignment draws more attention to the detail and results in a more thorough description of the architectural characteristics of such structures. The student displays a deeper understanding of building technology, materials used, compositional features and architectural terminology through the newly designed assignment.

Student response: My funerary complex would be a step pyramid to demonstrate my elite status in society throughout my life, while showing my place amongst the gods in the afterlife. The path to the entrance would encircle the entire complex, beginning with a dirt path and leading to a rising staircase, to demonstrate to all visitors my connection to my people as well as the long and difficult path through life I took to be in my position. The stairs will be jagged rock, with a smooth and polished center to show the focus I had throughout turbulent times in my life. The outer sides of the path will have many massive columns to demonstrate the strength and size of my complex’s protectors. The exterior will be decorated with fierce looking reliefs that tell the strong history of my ruling style and what I did to those who crossed me. The interior will have paintings of flowers to welcome visitors. The top of my pyramid will not be pointed, but flat. There will be obelisks built on each corner, in alignment with the cardinal points of the compass. One will be larger facing the sunset, to signify that I have passed from this life over to the next. There will be three pools carved into the top. One will be filled with water, one will be left dry. Each will accordingly accept gifts of food and beverage for me in the afterlife. The third and largest pool, the Pool of Peace, will be filled with water, but will remain still, as a testament of the peace I brought to my people towards the end of my reign. There will be windows around the pools that will allow funerary texts on the walls inside the pyramid to be lighted as the sun passes over. Next to the pyramid a pylon temple will be built, facing west towards the sunset. The court will have another deep pool to reflect the torches hanging of the pillars surrounding it. Pathways will be narrow and around the sides to slow anyone who tries to steal from or disrespect my final resting place. Past
the main courtroom will be the hypostyle hall. Each pillar inside the hall will have a painted relief of me giving my respects to gods Amon, Tefnut, Shu, Isis, Osiris, Horus, Maat, Thoth. There will be colossal statues of me by the entrance to the next hall, demonstrating my central presence throughout the complex. Going into the sanctuary visitors will see an altar with a fake sarcophagus and valuables. One may only approach the front of the altar to pray to myself and the gods. In this room the walls will be covered with funerary texts telling my story, protecting me and my akh in the afterlife. Behind the altar will be the girdle wall which wraps around the back extending back to the hypostyle hall, fortifying the inner temple’s strength, while also making this room look to be the most valuable. Underneath the altar will be stairs that lead down originally but then circle around the girdle wall up towards the top. My true resting room will lie beneath the Pool of Peace, the center room of a series of rooms under the pools that tell the story of my life utilizing murals and the sunlight. My room will be filled with the treasures I wish to bring to the afterlife. My ka statue will be placed inside the pyramid.

Learning outcomes: The student displays knowledge of architectural vocabulary, uses the terms appropriately, and discusses the social and religious aspects of funerary complexes, the role of an Egyptian ruler in the society. This 580-word posting displays the student’s imagination and creative approach.

3.2 Assignment on Roman Residential Architecture

The objective of the discussion forum: the student needs to get better understanding of Roman residential architecture using the examples of Pompeian houses. Desired learning outcomes include demonstrating an understanding of the social and political conditions of ancient Rome, functions and terms of different rooms in a Roman house, the importance of ancestor busts in the Roman culture, correct implementation of art and architectural vocabulary. Instead of the impersonal "describe the main parts of a Pompeian house", the assignment asks the student to imagine inviting friends and showing them around the house.

For her response the student (Gina M.) wrote a dialogue, in which she (the host) explains to her friend the main parts of a Pompeian house and the function associated with each space.

GINA: Did you find my domus easily enough?

CONCETTA: Yes, Gina. I followed the directions into Pompeii. When I saw the stores across the street, I knew I was in the area. How long have you lived here?

GINA: Marino and I moved in after the last election. We acquired it from a master builder. He moved on to another project. Please be careful on the stairs leading up to the fauces. Step into the atrium.

GINA: Marino and I moved in after the last election. We acquired it from a master builder. He moved on to another project. Please be careful on the stairs leading up to the fauces. Step into the atrium.

CONCETTA: You get so much light in this atrium, I bet the fact that your cubicula are windowless, does not even bother you.

GINA: No. The complivium really takes advantage of the position of the sun.

CONCETTA: Tell me about the stone around the floor.

GINA: Well, the surround of the impluvium consists of a clay-toned travertine. It’s sort of like a cistern and has a large capacity for collecting rainwater. The thing we loved most about the atrium was these grand Corinthian columns. I appreciated the artist’s use of colored marbles around the base of the columns to complement the mosaic floor. The mosaic-inlaid floors are cool to the touch. This works out well in the heat of the summer months. If you notice, they are pictures of the Roman gods composed of red, gold, and green pieces of tile. Concetta, follow me into my cubiculum. Do you notice the bed? The craftsman used the encaustic method of burning colored waxes into the headboard.

CONCETTA: I love the colors. Sage green and sienna orange are a beautiful combination. The colors dance off the fresco mural. What inspired that scene?

GINA: I’m glad you asked. My family owned a vineyard years ago. Father bestowed it to my eldest brother. I wanted the memories of running through the grapevines, so I commissioned an artist to paint it. He applied a water-based paint onto the freshly plastered wall so it would form a bond.

CONCETTA: How many arches are in the home in total?

GINA: There are 16 arches all positioned in symmetry. The vaults are coffered to give the rooms depth and architectural interest. There is one roofline that has an exception to that, and that is the one that has a cupola. I wanted a place where I could reflect on the beauty and art the city of Pompeii has to offer. Now, if you follow me down the hall, I will show you another delightful view of the garden.
GINA: The tablinum has all of our portraits and family documents. Father left some of his early writings to me. The fountain has run continuously since we've taken possession of the domain. Being so close to the aqueduct gives us great water pressure. I also burn herbs in that sculpted urn. The woody scent reminds me of my childhood; sitting under the grapevines after a heavy rain I would drink in the strong and powerful aroma.

GINA: No, I wanted the walls to glow with color, so I had them painted and decorated with stucco panels to imitate marble. The mason mixed the stucco with marble dust. If you have any knowledge of it, the Greeks used that technique. I wanted rich panels of red, green, and tan, and framed by white molding to give it an architectural illusion of a painting. Come into the garden.

GINA: No, it is behind the domus, right through this portico. We have another cistern here in the corner for convenience in cooking. I love my exquisite herb garden full of basil, oregano, garlic, parsley, and fennel. As you can see, we decided to landscape it with olive and lemon trees. When the fruits ripen, we bring them into the kitchen. They are epicurean delights when dressing a salad! Look at the songbirds resting on that perch.

GINA: It is half cultivated and half wild. We have the most tender fungi growing under that mossy tree to your right. When sautéed with wine, garlic and fennel, it makes the most delicate garnish to the meat. Lidia, my cook, made the most wonderful Gruem vel anatem for you. It will be served in triclinium.

GINA: Well, we really would like to continue with our art collection. Right now we have several veristic sculptures in bronze. They really are not very striking and are a bit unflattering, but they belonged to Marino’s family. I would like to commission an artist to complete another relief similar to the Tellus relief. I really love how Mother Earth is portrayed in that piece. I would like to create a vignette in each of the four halls. Each could represent a season. Right now life is bountiful and fruitful. In time we will personalize the space, but you know what they say about Rome, Concetta…

CONCETTA: ...it was not built in a day!

Learning outcomes: In this 880-word response the student displays a creative approach, in-depth knowledge of architectural vocabulary. The parts of the house are accurately described; the student also shows her familiarity with Pompeian wall painting techniques, veristic bust sculptures, traditions, cooking.

3.3 Assignment on Gothic Art and Architecture

Knowledge of the architecture of a Gothic cathedral is essential in understanding of the Gothic style. To motivate the students to prove a better understanding of Gothic architecture, the assignment of describing the main components of a Gothic cathedral was modified to include a more personalized perception of the building. The goal is to make the students study the main components, both structural and decorative, of a Gothic cathedral and to incorporate this knowledge of architectural terminology into their writing. The assignment more appropriate for an Engaged Learning Environment is formulated as: “Plan your dream wedding, choose a cathedral in France or England, picture your wedding ceremony in the cathedral. Describe its architecture and talk about the reasons you made that choice. Would you prefer Romanesque severity or Gothic elegance? Are you fond of dramatic soaring heights of French naves or do you prefer the tranquility of English Gothic interiors?”

Student response: Bonjour! I was very excited for this assignment because my fiancé and I are in the midst of planning our own wedding! I always wanted to travel to Paris and to plan my dream wedding at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France. Why? The Notre Dame Cathedral is the most popular monument in Paris and in all of France, beating even the Eiffel Tower with 13 million visitors each year. Plus, I remember growing up watching Disney’s “The Hunch Back of Notre Dame,” since then getting married in this church has always been a dream! My best friend from Paris suggested the Reims Cathedral. I admitted I didn’t know much about the Reims Cathedral. My fiancé and I
researched the Reims Cathedral on the Internet and discovered a wealth of information. After much research we learned that the Reims Cathedral (c. 1225-99) makes an instructive contrast with the west façade of the Notre Dame in Paris, even though its basic design was conceived only 30 years later. With the information gathered we decided to marry at the Reims Cathedral!

As my guests approach the cathedral, they will catch a glimpse of the Great Rose Window as well as the Gallery of Kings from the cathedral’s western façade. My wedding guests will enjoy being surrounded by nearly 2,300 other decorative statues; it is one of Reims’ most notable features and an excellent example of Gothic-era workmanship. The nave of the Reims Cathedral is extra-long, so my fiancé and I will have a long walk down the aisle. The nave was built extra-long so more people could see the kings as they were being crowned. The central portal on the west facade is dedicated to Virgin Mary and features a stunning 13th-century window. The window shows Virgin Mary surrounded by apostles and numerous angel musicians, and is set within a larger window. In Reims cathedral this window replaces the more usual stoned relief tympanum. The Great Rose Window is best viewed at sunset, when the light illuminates every feature of the stained glass composition. My vows will be exchanged at sunset, so every facet of light and color will be shining through on my fiancé and me. More interesting information acquired through researching the Reims is that the height of its central nave is 125 feet, 5 feet more than the Chartres. Like Chartres, the cathedral at Reims has a four-part groin vaulted ceiling, and the whole upper part of the wall has a row of clerestory windows made of stained glass. The transept and the apse of Reims cathedral is reminiscent of the Chartres cathedral, with tall stained glass lancets. There are five radiating chapels around the ambulatory behind the choir. These great Gothic features are why I choose the Reims Cathedral.

I prefer the Gothic elegance because Romanesque churches are round-arched, heavy, and solid and do not provide the light found in Gothic style churches. Gothic churches have pointed arches and soaring lightness in structure. Gothic style changed the Romanesque tradition of massive masonry with small openings, replacing it with a style where light appears to triumph over substance. The features that brought the change are flying buttresses and the colored light, which Abbot Suger called ‘lux nova’. With its use came the development of many other architectural devices, previously put to the test in scattered buildings and then called into service to meet the structural, aesthetic and ideological needs of the new style. These include the pointed arches, ribbed vaults, pinnacles and windows which typify Gothic ecclesiastical architecture.

I chose this French Gothic cathedral because of the size and the height of its interiors; the interior of the cathedral is exceptionally large, measuring more than 455 feet in length, 98 feet in width and nearly 125 feet in height. Elements of the interior include a nave with aisles, north and south transepts with aisles, a choir with double aisles and an apse with ambulatory and radiating chapels. The interior also features many brilliant tapestries, masterpiece-quality artwork, a flamboyant Gothic organ and even a stained glass window designed by Marc Chagall.

My guests will fly Ryanair to Tours-Val de Loire International Airport. Guest will be lodging at Indre-et-Loire holiday chateau. Lastly, we have arranged for my guests to visit the Effel Tower, enjoy a French wine tasting, and visit the museum of Palais du Tau directly adjoining the Reims Cathedral.

Learning outcomes: The student compares the Notre-Dame of Paris and the Reims cathedrals, displays knowledge of the structural components of a Gothic building. Student also includes additional information on the cathedral, not included in the textbook, such as modern-era windows designed by Marc Chagall. She is excited about the upcoming wedding and even researches the vicinity of the Reims Cathedral and plans her guests’ itinerary and lodging.

3.4 The Effects of Role Playing in an Engaged Learning Environment

As mentioned above, one of the main objectives of any art history course is the understanding of social, historical, political, and religious conditions of the society where the work of art was created. Viewing the artwork in the context of all above-mentioned conditions ensures deep understanding of the motives of the artist or the commissioner. Placing students into the cultural environment of the society forces them to think about every little detail of the society. Role playing works very well in face-to-face courses, particularly in writing assignments, where the interaction is limited to the student and the instructor; there is no student-to-student interaction. It is harder to create situations when the students respond to each other’s writings, engage in arguments, support their ideas with documentation and evidence. In an online environment role playing may be turned into a very intriguing learning experience.

The following example from the foundation level History of Art II survey course demonstrates students' enthusiasm for role playing. Included here are just excerpts from a lively conversation and argumentation in which almost the entire class was involved. The same students posted several times,

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returning to the same assignment and engaging again and again in an argument with their peers. This type of knowledge construction is almost impossible with a more traditional and impersonal assignment formulated as "Compare and contrast the styles of Romanticism, Neoclassicism and Realism." Personalization of the assignment creates an Engaged Learning Environment where students learn and enjoy working on the assignment. Obviously, the class was very enthusiastic about this assignment; the entire conversation took place during two days.

Assignment: "In this assignment we will try role playing! You will demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Realism through conversations with your peers. You are a 19th century artist in Paris, France. You belong to one of the three directions (the choice is yours), in fact, you believe that your direction is the only "correct" one, and you are ready to engage in an argument with anyone who thinks otherwise. Tonight you are a participant of a social gathering, where you meet several artists (your classmates). Somehow you are pulled into an emotional discussion with your fellow artists, who, for some incomprehensible reason, don't share your opinion. Try to convince them that the style you represent (Neoclassicism, Romanticism, or Realism) is better than the others, and explain why."

Students' responses in the sequence they were posted to the Discussion Board:

Linda F.: “Good evening, fellow artists! It gives me great pleasure to be here this evening. I am a true Romanticist and I hope that most of you would share the same direction that I have followed. Even though some may say that Neoclassicism is superior to Romanticism, the true spirit of modern art is in Romanticism. As you know, Romanticism has a wide range of subject matter, and of course, we have to offer more than Neoclassicists. I do realize that neoclassical art displays order and clarity, whereas the Romanticists hold on to emotional expressions and sentimental values and are interested in how the mind works. Well, we like to be mysterious and unexplained. The correct path is Romanticism; look at the number of Romanticist painters and compare to our Neoclassicist painter colleagues, who are outnumbered. You may know the famous artist Eugene Delacroix; I would like you to examine his fine work. His paintings are magnificent, his brush stroke has a broad sweep of color, and his paintings have lively pattern, they seem to come alive! And all this is only because he is a Romanticist, of course. Have you heard about Delacroix and Ingres, how they quarreled over colorito and disegno, because they have their own unique ideas about color and design?"

Mya C.: “Good heavens, those Romantics… think they are so right all the time. The one true style is Neoclassicism; everyone knows that. Not just here, but also in America too. And, thank heavens, we have evolved from that frivolous Rococo hogwash. Romantics are so dark. There is clarity to the Neoclassical style with impressions of stability and solidity. You would be hard pressed to not know the meaning of a painting and not have to worry about all the double entendres and fluffy, flowery stuff of Rococo and those Romantics. Delacroix could not hold Jacques-Louis David’s turpentine! The clarity of David’s work, and the impression that his work has on the people of France has been monumental. That is why Napoleon himself chose this artist out of thousands! The precise detail of his work Napoleon at Saint Bernard Pass is inspirational to my fellow Frenchmen and me. The exotic sensuality and color that one of David’s students, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres created with his Grande Odalisque is breathtaking. You need not take my view alone. Take for example the great American statesman Thomas Jefferson. He could have chosen any architectural style in the world, and he, in all his wisdom, has chosen for his own residence, and that of his university, the Neoclassical style to create Monticello, the state capitol building and the Rotunda at the University of Virginia. Please, do consider what I have said, but I remain steadfast in my rationale that the only true style is that of the Neoclassicism.”

Linda F.: “My dear fellow Neoclassicist Artist, we do need to be honest with one another, there is nothing dark about Romantics, we are to be looked at as bright and alive, loving and with great expression. Do try to reconsider your direction from Neoclassical style, to Romanticism. Just look at the extraordinary masterpiece of Delacroix Liberty Leading the People, and the fine work of Gericault; this does outweigh any of Neoclassical artist’s work. May I add there is nothing of Rococo that is hogwash? Be true and steadfast, follow Romanticism.”

Rebekah S.: “My fellow Romanticist artist Linda, I understand the significance Romanticism had on the French Revolution, however being that we are now in the 19th century and the French revolution was in the 18th century, it might be beneficial for us to support the direction of art with more current focuses, which is Realism. Something to consider, please.”

Linda F.: “My dear Realist Artist Rebekah, you do realize that you have to look at past knowledge such as the French Revolution and all the famous painting of the Romanticism to bring us to the present. Realism needs to be looked at more closely.”

Carol V.: “Hello colleagues, I couldn't help but to hear your conversation and realize that you didn’t really know the true meaning of Romanticism. Let’s start by discussing the other different types of art and why I think that you should stick to Romanticism. The first will be Neoclassicism. The term Neoclassicism refers to the classical revival in European art, architecture, and interior design that lasted from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Neoclassical artists incorporated classical elements and subjects, including columns, and other ornamental schemes in their work. The movement emphasized the line over the color, light, and atmosphere. The architecture of this style is a
clear revival of Greek and Roman architecture; the height of Neoclassicism was displayed in the paintings of Jacques-Louis David. Now let’s talk about Realism. Realism often refers to the artistic movement, which began in France in the 1850’s. Realism meaning “objectively real”, Realism is the depiction of subjects as they appear in everyday life, without embellishment or interpretation. Now for my favorite and the one style I think you should believe in and use the most, Romanticism, it began in the late 18th to the mid 19th century. Romanticism exalted individualism, subjectivism, irrationalism, and imagination. Romantic artists were fascinated by the nature, their moods. Romanticism expresses emotions and it can be found in each artist’s creation. I truly suggest that you take a closer look at some of these paintings and think about the artist and what story they are trying to tell us.”

Elisha D.: “I am not one to offend people in their preference of art, however, I might be able to be of assistance in this debate we have of the best style in the art world. I have been a fan of painting of all three classes. In fact in the Neoclassicist style I adore Marie-Guillémine Benoist’s Portrait of a Negroess, which was inspired by Jacques-Louis David, this particular painting combines both the aspects of Neoclassicism and Romanticism with the figure in the painting’s skin contrasting to the classicizing white drapery and the romantic characteristics being brought out with the figure’s turban and gold earrings. Jean Francois Millet’s Gleaners is another one of my favorites in the realist’s perspective. This portrait gives off some sort of transition from Romanticism to Realism. The focus of the peasants on their work in the fields gives the sense of “oneness with nature” as the romanticism aspect would deal with and the hard physical labor of the job compared to the lifestyle of the wealthy as a realistic aspect. However, while the Neoclassicism deals with the virtues of order and clarity, Romantics believed in emotional expression and sentiment. Realism, on the other hand, primarily is concerned with the direct observation of society and nature as well as political and social satire. With all these things in mind I tend to believe that the best style is romanticism. Romantics are genuinely interested in “the mind as the site of mysterious, unexplained, and possibly dangerous phenomena”, therefore, dreams and nightmares are depicted as internal events and are interesting factors in portraying art. What better way to create a great piece of art than by digging into the depths of one’s dreams? The outcome becomes more surreal and unforgettable. A prime example would be Francisco de Goya’s Chronos Devouring One of His Children. Although the painting is disturbing and the scenery is dark and depicts horror, it is still unforgettable.”

Cherie R.: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I must say that I overheard your conversations related to Romanticism. I know enough about Romanticism and the brilliant painters that are involved in that direction. I can truly say that Romanticism expresses emotions and it can be found in each artist’s creation. First of all, Francisco de Goya, a Spanish painter of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a remarkable painter. His work is compelling and his images reflect paintings that are based on psychological insights and display his support for the cause of political freedom. Another brilliant painter was Theodore Gericault. His paintings reflected how the human mind works. Some of his paintings captured the mental disturbance of his subjects through their pose and physiognomy. Gericault was a man of paradoxes a fashionable society figure, but a political and social liberal who was active in exposing injustice. I would suggest for all of you to look at each artist and the story they are telling as well as their exquisite work and see how each one display their artistic talent in their paintings. Having an interest in how the mind works I find that Romanticism is the only true way.”

Dyasha A.: “Excuse me, my fellow artists, but I could not help overhearing your conversation. Everyone knows the one true art form is Realism. We exhibit the new social awareness in our art work. The social observation in our art has much more meaning than what Romanticism and Neoclassicism represent. Neither one can compare to the message portrayed in Honoré Daumier’s Interior of a First-Class Carriage and Third-Class Carriage. This is truly what the art of Realism is about. We show “real life” with the division of the classes and class struggles. We should all agree that Realism is art with a purpose and meaning. If you have any doubt to what I am saying take a look at Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Annunciation, and understand the meaning behind the painting, surely you will agree that we, Realists, are better than any Romanticist or Neoclassicist artist.”

Rebekah S.: “My fellow artist Dyasha, I’m glad to see we’re on the same page of how far advanced Realism is compared to Romanticism and Neoclassicism. It’s expresses so much truth and authenticity of our developing society, a direction much needed in the art industry! I am here to speak on behalf of Realism; an era like no other before. Neoclassicism was determined for a revolution and Romanticism was determined to express emotional sentiment of time and struggle, however Realism is determined to do both and holds its motives like no other artistic era. With so many revolutionary endeavors occurring within this century Realism narrates intrinsic attitudes and spirits of the many social and political milestones of the European nation in a very genuine and authentic way. Many paintings of the realism era capture the true circumstances of society using political and social symbolism with naturalism, socialism and satirical impressionism. All of which are constant and significant proverbial “social trademarks” within our society. Jean-Francois Millet, Rosa Bonheur, Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier are the fine artists that use the natural existence as thematic expression of the world around them. This is a revolutionary time where new technologies are being invented which demand more workers, which then create more social classes, which then demand more and new freedoms, which then attract more people. Photography, an artistic invention, is first used in the Realist era, which is another form of art to capture a depict authenticity of time, nature and society. Lithography, another artistic invention during this time to express satirical and comical relief
for the oppressed people, can be found in newspapers, creating a whole new era of communication. Realism captures such events of the social and political chains as well as connecting all revolutions, economical, social and political to the formation of new freedoms and a new found society, one that neither Neoclassicism nor Romanticism has seen. Realism is in a whole new category of art, comparably speaking, and we should endure this narration of time with appreciation and class as Realism has done! So fellow artist, you can now see how Realism stands out from the other two directions of art. Realism captures everything that Romanticism and Neoclassicism did, plus more! There’s nothing quite like it!"

Jennifer L.: “Dyasha, I also overheard this conversation but I have a different viewpoint. Romanticism cannot be identified with a single style, technique, or attitude, but romantic painting is generally characterized by a highly imaginative and subjective approach, emotional intensity, and a dreamlike or visionary quality. Romantic art characteristically strives to express by suggestion, states of feeling too intense, mystical, or elusive to be clearly defined. Realism, on the other hand, is an attempt to describe human behavior and surroundings or to represent figures and objects exactly as they act or appear in life. I just think as an artist that there is much more creativity and thought behind the Romanticism style”.

Zenobia M.: “Fellow realists, I am not trying to pry on what you are discussing or invade you privacy, but it is very rare that I meet realists like myself. I believe that experience is everything. How can one paint love if one does not know what it is or has never seen nor experienced it? How can we distinguish what is real and what is made up unless we know from our own real experience. I can appreciate that realists base their paintings on economic, social, and political issues. A good friend of mine, Gustave Courbet once said “show me an angel and I will paint one.” Gustave believes that we can represent only what we have seen. I recently saw Honoré’s painting The First-Class Carriage it was magnificent in its realistic manner, don’t you, ladies, think?”

Students have engaged in a lively conversation, returning several times to the same topic and supporting their argument with examples from the textbook. They display amazing enthusiasm for the subject and the topic of the discussion.

4 STUDENT FEEDBACK

Student feedback (course evaluation) is an important part for any instructional design, but it is especially critical for distance learning, because in face-to-face environment the instructor receives messages from the students throughout the semester, while in the online environment it is harder to get immediate feedback due to the lack of direct interaction. Some of the platforms used for online instruction (ex. BlackBoard) allow anonymous posts, and opening a feedback forum for anonymous expression of concerns and evaluation is very helpful; students are honest and are not afraid of causing instructor’s anger for expressing their impressions openly. Using own feedback forum is more effective than the standard evaluations provided by the higher educational institution because the instructor can ask specific questions, the answers to which may help re-evaluating and reinforcing the main components of the course and specific assignments.

The following excerpts from feedback posted in the most recent courses display the satisfaction level of the students.

“i loved the discussion boards; they were fun to complete, and very interesting. It was a great way to take what we learned from the book and apply it to our life”.

“It wasn’t about memorizing the paintings and who painted them. It was really integrating the art, history, cultures and religions of each period which made the course so interesting”.

“I am a history major and took this course because I wanted to gain a better view of history not only from names and dates and places but from a more personal, social perspective. Art is a reflection of a people during their history; I think that taking this course definitely helped prepare me to better understand history especially that of western civilizations through the people's unique perspective, their art work”.

“The subject and the selection and content of the course were incredibly interesting”.

“It was the best online course ever taken, and all online courses should follow your format... loved it!”

Judging from the responses provided by the students, they like assignments which involve personal and life situations. They like intriguing, intellectually stimulating assignments. They feel ‘engaged’. Isn’t that every instructor’s goal?
References


Online learning or distance learning is an important part of University teaching around the world with the fact that there is a great need to provide flexible delivery of education. It is gaining popularity in the educational world nowadays. This trend will likely continue due to the globalization of education and the spread of new and adequate information technology tools. It gives flexibility to the learners in terms of time and place. Moreover, it allows a person to continue job and other responsibilities. (Harandi, 2015; Hathaway). There are many approaches to online learning such as web ba In this issue: Importance of Learner-Learner Interaction in Distance Education. Jason H. Sharp Jason B. Huett. Tarleton State University University of West Georgia. Stephenville, TX 76401 USA Carrollton, GA 30118 USA. Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to draw conclusions regarding the importance of learner-. learner interaction when compared to learner-content and learner-instructor interaction in distance. education.Â proposed for use in distance education, the importance of designing interaction into dis-tance learning. environments, and the frameworks suggested for effective facilitation of inter-action. While current. research may not be able to ascertain which type of interaction is most important to students in. Distance learning has facilitated innovative means to include Cooperative Learning (CL) in virtual settings. This study, conducted at a Hispanic-Serving Institution, compared the effectiveness of online CL strategies in discussion forums with traditional online forums. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 56 graduate student participants. Quantitative results revealed no significant difference on student success between CL and Traditional formats. The qualitative data revealed that students in the cooperative learning groups found more learning benefits than the Traditional gr Personalized learning is always a good idea, but in remote teaching, it may be even more critical than a standard classroom (if for no other reason than itâ€™s easier to â€œloseâ€ students or for students to â€œhideâ€ during synchronous distance learning). A basic strategy here is to create tiered learning targets. For example: Tier 1: Students will be able to roughly define a metaphor.