



Making Art History Come Alive in the Online Classroom

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Abstract

Student engagement, development of critical thinking, and fostering original ideas are among the many challenges of online course design. This concern is particularly pertinent for courses in humanities, where the lack of face to face interaction and group discussions needs to be compensated with other methods resulting in similarly successful learning outcomes.

Since most of the communication and exchange of ideas in the online classroom takes place in discussion threads, designing intellectually stimulating and motivating discussion topics is instrumental for fostering students' enthusiasm for the subject. The paper discusses learner engagement strategies the author has developed, experimented with and found to be effective in asynchronous art history online courses. It argues that assignments placing students in imaginary situations within the cultural environments of particular historical periods promote critical thinking and encourage students to explore social, political, and religious conditions of the societies in which works of art were produced. Allowing students to choose the format for their discussion posting is another factor that contributes to motivating and engaging students.

The paper presents several types of assignments which make art history come alive, such as reenactment of competitions, acting as historical figures, commissioning artworks, assuming personalities of famous artists. These intellectually stimulating topics encourage learners to show their creative talent in a variety of discussion posting formats, ranging from poetry to play scenes. Seeing the history of art unfold through the eyes of its participants motivates online learners and personalizes their learning experience, compelling them to exercise both curiosity and creativity – essential components of engaged learning. Case studies will be included to support this argument, drawing on examples from online undergraduate art history modules designed and taught over the last eight years.