



2009

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### Recommended Citation

Ter-Stepanian, Anahit, "Adaptation of Art History Courses to the Online Environment: Problems and Perspectives" (2009). *Art & Design Faculty Publications*. 13.  
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# **Adaptation of Art History Courses to the Online Environment: Problems and Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Distance learning poses new problems for instructors and changes the traditional understanding of instructional design. The adaptation of traditional, face-to-face courses to asynchronous online format entails redefining pedagogical practices and presents new challenges for designers and instructors resulting from the lack of direct student-instructor interaction. This is particularly pertinent in art history courses, where critical thinking, group discussions, critiquing works of art as well as assessment methods heavily rely on student's physical presence in the classroom. Faculty members are skeptical of the effectiveness of distance learning and voice their concerns. The paper questions whether it is possible to ensure students' proper command of the course material, develop critical thinking, and effectively engage learners in the online environment. The author describes approaches that she has developed, experimented with and found to be effective in asynchronous online art history courses, argues the importance of timed tests, and presents learner engagement strategies she has implemented in the eLearning environment. The paper demonstrates how to create collaborative learning environment through student group discussions in online art history courses, discusses the advantages of scenario-based discussions board assignments and the effects of role playing in discussion forums. The author argues that personalized discussion board assignments motivate learners, improve peer-to-peer interaction, and prevent plagiarism. The paper presents different types of scenario-based assignments and their learning outcomes.

## **Introduction**

In the last two decades we see huge changes in higher education. Distance learning is becoming its important part. With these changes the number of online courses and programs offered at colleges and universities grows each year. Distance learning presents a new teaching environment and not everyone is ready for the change. While some consider the experience very rewarding (Greco, 2009), many faculty members voice their concerns about online teaching and question the quality of online courses (Adams, 2009). There are instructors who feel dissatisfied and prefer not to be involved in distance learning. To summarize

her feelings about her online teaching experience this one college instructor states: 'I trained for it, I tried it, and I'll never do it again' (Clift 2009, A33). In her own words, she felt that she was underpaid, never had time off, and after breaking out in rashes and sleepless nights, completely refused to teach online courses. This might be a unique case of extreme detestation of virtual teaching experience, but it is not the only one; many faculty members mention that due to immense pressure placed on them by the need to develop, design, and deliver online courses, some prefer not to be involved in distance learning (Kirtman, 2009), or at the least are skeptical about distance learning being an alternative to face-to-face traditional courses (Shin & Lee, 2009).

In addition to funding online course development, there is also a need to retrain the teaching faculty. Instructors need to gain technical knowledge (Lyons, 2004) and learn how to work with Learning Management Systems. In most cases technical guidance is readily available to faculty and schools have IT support teams with highly skilled personnel. However, the technical problems are just one part of the challenge. In distance learning the faculty faces a completely new pedagogical environment. There is a definite gap between clarification of technical aspects of online teaching and discussion of fundamental pedagogical problems, especially those pertaining to specific disciplines (Bailey & Card, 2009). Thus pedagogical aspects of online teaching are often left to an individual instructor's 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 student and teacher in a virtual classroom.

Traditional understanding of instructional design also changes in the online environment. In addition to getting used to a completely different type of interaction with students, many instructors and the faculty involved in the adaptation of face-to-face courses to online format face a wide range of new tasks in the course development stage. Many pedagogical issues need to be redefined in online instructional design: content delivery, creating collaborative learning environment, establishing effective student-instructor and student-student interaction, engaging students, encouraging critical thinking, ensuring students' command of the material. Some of these problems are discipline-specific. While every course needs serious rethinking when offered online, the adaptation of art history courses to the online environment is particularly difficult because of the nature of art history instruction. There are many aspects that need to be addressed in online art history courses, including assessment methods, development of critical thinking, ability to view the works of art in their relationship with historical, social, religious conditions, understanding of the role of the commissioners, aesthetic tastes of the society, and many others. In addition, there is a very limited research and published scholarship on pedagogical aspects of online instructional design in art history (Donahue-Wallace, 2008).

## Testing in the 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. Online assessment is challenging because most common assessment methods in art history courses assume students' physical presence in a classroom. A typical face-to-face art history exam consists of three sections: slide recognition, a set of questions, and essays. Sometimes art history tests also include recognition of unknown works of art.

One of the main assessment tools in face-to-face art history courses is the recognition of artworks. During the test students have to write the title, the author's name (if applicable), the period, the style, and the date of displayed artworks, usually between ten and twenty. This assessment loses its purpose in online courses, because students have immediate access to all that information due to the open book nature of testing.

Art history exams in face-to-face, particularly foundation-level, courses also include test questions to assess student's general command of factual material. This section usually includes multiple-choice, fill in blanks, and open ended questions. This type of assessment may be used in the online environment as an effective instrument to ensure students read the textbook, as well as test students' knowledge of the factual material. Learning environments most commonly used today in higher education (BlackBoard, WebCT/Vista) provide functionality for timed tests. In online art history courses that I design I include tests with 20-30 questions on each chapter. The tests are timed, usually between one and two hours, and have to be taken in one sitting. When the student has very limited time to answer these questions he or she will be motivated to read the entire chapter before opening the test. It is true that the student has the opportunity to refer to the textbook during the test, and find the exact place in the textbook that contains the answer to the question. However, the allocated time is not enough to digest the text and correctly answer the questions. Students themselves admit that reading the textbook helped getting ready for online quizzes. The best proof of that is what students tell in their anonymous feedback. In every class there are students who mention that they felt that reading the textbook was instrumental for successful performance on online timed tests. The following are two excerpts from anonymous feedback on Summer 2009 History of Art I course at Southern Connecticut State University. 'The exams were not bad if you had read the chapter' and 'The tests were kind of difficult if you do not read the chapter. I tried it both ways, and discovered that the tests were better after the chapter is read.' These two comments show that their authors have tried taking online tests without reading the textbook and found it necessary to first read the chapter and then open the test. What better prove does the course designer need that timed tests force students to read the book?

Despite of this many online art history course designers choose to dismiss online quizzes. Opinions are mixed whether tests and quizzes should be part of online assessment. The recent trend in the theory of instructional design places a strong emphasis on discussion board assignments and almost completely dismisses online timed tests. Is this approach justified? I teach a course on architectural history for a very reputable online school, where course designers are convinced that quizzes are not effective in open book environment and thus shouldn't be used. After teaching over ten sections of the course at this particular school I have noticed that many students are able to complete the course without reading the textbook. There were many cases when in discussion postings, and even in small projects, some students display their lack of basic familiarity with the course material. When delivery of material is administered in the online environment the instructor doesn't have any tools to ensure the student's even very basic familiarity with the entire material only based on students' writing submission, both discussions and papers. I believe that timed quizzes on chapters are very important. How else can the instructor make sure that student reads the textbook?

### **Critical Thinking in the Online Environment**

Development of critical thinking is another area that needs to be addressed in instructional design of online art history courses. Traditional art history instruction relies on students' physical presence in the classroom, involves an abundance of visual material, parallel display and comparison of works of art, discussion-intensive rather than informative knowledge gaining, and context-based viewing of art historical material. Among the many new issues that need to be addressed in the online environment, instructors consider development of critical thinking skills and fostering original ideas especially challenging (Clift, 2009). This concern is particularly pertinent for art history, which, more than any other discipline, involves critical thinking. 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 the understanding of art history. In-class discussion is a vital part of traditional art history instruction. It is during these discussions that students express their own ideas about works of art, suggest different readings of the same painting or sculpture, learn how to connect the artworks with historical and religious realities of the society, see signs of the artist's own feelings in his or her art, encounter particular trends, tastes, aesthetic preferences. Historical, social, political, religious, and gender issues are often addressed during these lively 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, and challenge students to

think outside of the box. 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 of the work of art. Creating a similar discussion-intensive learning environment and fostering critical thinking, therefore, become the primary goals of online art history instructional design.

How can the online instructor ensure that students understand the key concepts, gain sufficient knowledge, develop critical thinking skills without the direct face-to-face interaction? In the online classroom, particularly in art history courses, the maximum and optimal use of discussion board or message board functionality is the tool to develop critical thinking. Discussion board assignments also help overcome the main disadvantages of asynchronous online art history courses — the lack of group communication involving instructors and students. These assignments are instrumental in creating a collaborative learning environment in an online classroom and providing a creative platform where students can successfully exchange ideas, and learn from each other. Studies on online teaching emphasize the importance of student-student and instructor-student interaction in creating collaborative learning environments and virtual classroom communities (Paloff & Pratt, 2007).

In addition to fostering critical thinking and creating a collaborative learning environment, discussion board assignments may be used to engage and motivate online learners. The importance of engaging students to achieve improved learning outcomes is widely accepted. The advantages of an engaged learning environment are discussed in studies on pedagogical aspects of online instruction (Gunawardena et al., 2006). The following section describes some of the techniques I have used to create an engaged and collaborative learning environment, approaches I have developed, experimented with and found to be effective in asynchronous online art history courses.

### **Engaging Students with Personalized Assignments**

A meaningful and in-depth analysis of the topic rather than information sharing is the main goal of instructional design of discussion board assignments in art history online courses. When teaching face-to-face courses I dedicate a considerable part of the class time to open discussions of works of art. My goal is to create an environment where students are free to ask questions and express their ideas. I encourage my students to share their thoughts, opinions, judgments, find connections with political, social, and religious conditions of the time. We talk, we argue, we engage in debates and detailed discussions, we take votes, and while doing this we frequently refer to displayed slides. At first sight it might seem impossible to create the same engaging atmosphere of idea-sharing and

knowledge construction in an asynchronous online classroom, however, after many years of experimentation and fine tuning of my art history course assignments I believe I am able to create the same, if not more effective, learning experience.

In my first few years of online teaching my course assignments and discussion board topics were almost identical to essays most commonly used in face-to-face traditional courses. Some examples of such essays are assignments asking to compare and contrast two or more works of art, describe a painting or a sculpture, or discuss methods used by artists to evoke specific emotions. The purpose is to test students' knowledge of characteristic features of different artists or styles, or to test their ability to identify connections between cultures. Students demonstrate their factual and conceptual knowledge, their ability to draw conclusions, to focus on similarities and differences between works of art. When I used this type of topics for discussion board assignments in the online environment the students' responses most of the time were very brief and minimalist. The length of their postings met the minimum of the assignment requirement; I require at least three hundred-word postings. Student participation in the forum was minimal or just enough to fulfill the participation requirement, while student-student interaction was formal, often devoid of any interest. Postings lacked enthusiasm or motivation; most of the discussions were based on reworded narrating of the textbook or reading material.

I was not satisfied with students' writing, overwhelmed and disappointed reading over and over the textbook ideas expressed in different words. I began my search for new approaches to try to bring the enthusiasm and the engagement of the face-to-face classes into the online environment. Gradually, I modified discussion board assignments to make them more intriguing, more specific, even personal, and more closely related to students' lives. In addition, I encouraged the students to be creative in choosing the format for their postings and to use their imagination, while following the principles of formal writing and proper citation rules. To my great satisfaction, I noticed drastic improvement in student submissions as well as in discussion forum participation. Peer feedback became more meaningful, more focused on the topic of the assignment. The quality of discussion postings improved, writings became lengthier and more detailed, often included facts and information outside the textbook and assigned readings. It was during this very first semester when one of my students posted a small play script for the assignment on Roman residential architecture. This is when I knew I was on the right track. This particular assignment asked the students to invite a friend to their Pompeian house and show around the *domus*, meanwhile using the Roman terms for different rooms and explaining their purpose. In this play, the student composed a lively dialogue between herself, the hostess and her guest. Not only did she fulfill the requirements of the assignment and thoroughly described the purpose of each room, wall painting styles, furniture details, but she also found ancient Roman cooking recipes, described the plants and herbs

growing in her garden using their Latin names, and even described the gourmet dinner prepared for her guest. Encouraged by enhanced learning outcomes of the newly designed assignments I gradually completely redesigned all my courses, replacing essay-type topics with scenario type assignments. The results were so satisfying that now I use several scenario-type assignments also in my writing intensive face-to-face courses.

After designing fourteen online art history courses I came to believe that any discussion board topic as well as traditional in-class essay type of assignment may be successfully reworded and turned into a scenario-based assignment. I saw that scenarios allow students to exercise their imagination, sense of humor, show their creative talent, and, most importantly, be motivated about the material and the coursework. The theory of instructional design supports this observation. 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 (Keller, 1987). Some of the elements of Keller's model proved to be effective in the creation of an engaged learning environment in online art history courses. When discussion board assignments are designed in such a way as to stimulate active learning by causing curiosity and intensive inquiry, they motivate students. Several techniques prove to be effective, including role playing and modeling of real situations. By slightly modifying the tasks and avoiding impersonal 'describe, discuss, analyze' and replacing them with imaginative scenarios the learning outcomes drastically improve. 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.

How is a scenario-based assignment different from a typical essay type topic? The most common above-mentioned 'compare and contrast' assignment may be modified into several different exciting scenarios. For example, the student may be asked to act as an owner of a gallery who would like to purchase one of the two suggested works of art. In his or her discussion the student has to evaluate both works, make a choice and substantiate the decision with valid arguments. Thus the student is no longer a passive bystander, an outsider, who is allowed to look at two works in a museum and compare them without a more important role to play. He is now motivated and intrigued. Now the student is an active participant, willing to critically evaluate the works of art, look at them as a 'buyer', who is involved in a decision-making process and who has to come to a valid conclusion. The motivated and inspired student is more likely to conduct rigorous research, to find an interesting fact about the work of art, to gain more knowledge and come up with original ideas. With such a task the student is more likely to analyze rather than describe the artwork, to find supporting material to argue his or her opinion, and engage in a constructive dialogue with classmates to demonstrate his or her point. At this point, the student wants to know what the



class is thinking about his decision and wants to compare his own findings with the decisions made by his peers. This creates an interest in class assignments and results in improved student-student interaction. Students engage in these discussions with immense enthusiasm. The scenario continues even in their peer feedback, resulting in multiple posts and replies.

Scenario-based assignments place the students into factual historical contexts, make connections to students' lives, make them act in scenarios designed to encourage further inquiry into the details of the artists', commissioners', historical figures' lives. Scenario-based assignments are particularly effective in fostering students' interest not only towards the art historical material but also towards the social, historical, religious conditions of the cultures; they encourage creativity, motivation, inquiry. Students introduce factual and conceptual knowledge into their discussions, look for additional information, carry out independent research, and find data to support their arguments. By personalizing assignments, the online instructor encourages creativity, motivation, inquiry, and engagement.

In the section on Gothic art I want my students be able to distinguish between French and English Gothic architectural features. To motivate the students to prove a better understanding of Gothic architecture, I modified the assignment on describing the main components of a Gothic cathedral to include a more personalized perception of the building. My goal was to make students study the main components, both structural and decorative, of a Gothic cathedral and to incorporate their knowledge of architectural terminology into their writing. I formulated the assignment as follows: '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. Are you fond of dramatic soaring heights of French naves or do you prefer the tranquility of English Gothic interiors?'

Students enjoy dreaming, planning, and imagining. Most college students have a million ideas about that special day in their lives and this type of assignments provide a perfect opportunity to come up with different scenarios, different formats. Students write entries in their diaries, letters to their friends, design wedding invitations, or write announcement articles for newspapers. Regardless of the format, discussions incorporate terminology, descriptions of cathedrals, comparisons of English and French cathedrals. Male students often exercise their sense of humor and make fun of the fact that they are rarely involved in wedding planning and utilize resourceful approaches. One of the male students had a crew filming his wedding and a guest celebrity who was asking questions about the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, and receiving informed, detailed answers to all his questions.

Peer feedback has been especially impressive in the forum on Gothic art. The entire atmosphere is filled with enthusiasm for the subject matter, for cathedrals, for the most romantic cities to have a wedding in. It is hard to describe the excitement. In their anonymous end-of-the-semester feedback on discussion board

assignments students often acknowledge this assignment as their favorite in the entire course. Here is one example of student feedback: 'I enjoyed the postings the most out of this course, it encouraged me to really think about the subject matter, I also enjoyed being imaginative and making up my own story. My favorite posting was the wedding post' (Summer 2010, History of Art I, Southern Connecticut State University). It is hard to imagine this kind of enthusiasm for Gothic architecture in a face-to-face classroom.

Scenario-based assignments are equally effective when role playing is involved. When students are assigned roles, they often engage with extreme originality and they also interact with their peers in very creative ways. In the online environment role playing may be turned into a very intriguing learning experience. In the section on Early Renaissance art I ask my students to act as jurors of the 1401 competition of the wool merchant's guild, *Arte di Calimala*, for the bronze doors of the San Giovanni Baptistery, where they have to judge the entries by Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti. This allows students to engage in a constructive argument and lively conversation with opponents, consider differing opinions, convince other 'jurors' to agree with their opinion. They also learn to face the opponent, whose opinion might differ from their own. Students write passionate speeches, often with the same students posting several times. This type of knowledge construction is almost impossible in a traditional classroom or in the online environment with a more traditional and impersonal assignment formulated as 'compare and contrast.' Personalization of the assignment creates an engaged learning environment where students learn and enjoy working on the assignment.

### **Plagiarism and Personalized Assignments**

Academic dishonesty and plagiarism in online education is a major concern in the design and delivery of online courses (Stuber-McEwen et al., 2009). Studies addressing the issue suggest strategies for detection and remediation of intentional and unintentional plagiarism, such as conducting a quiz on academic integrity (Jocoy & DiBiase, 2006) or lecturing on anti-plagiarism (Brown et al., 2008). While the educational and administrative measures seem to be necessary, instructional design strategies might also serve as a plagiarism prevention tool.

There are definite advantages of using scenario-based assignments for preventing plagiarism. If the assignment is too general students might be tempted to find a readily available text on the Internet and copy and paste it into their discussion board posting. In bigger classes, ranging between thirty and forty students, using turnitin.com or other plagiarism-detecting tools becomes almost impossible due to large number of postings. In a scenario-based assignment the student is given a very specific and a unique task; the situation is described in great detail and the expectations are clearly defined. While students can use the Internet in their research, and can retrieve factual information about artists' lives,

social and cultural specifics in the society, it is very unlikely that they might come across readily-available texts and copy-and-paste entire paragraphs or even sentences. Thus, scenario-based assignments may serve as an effective method to eliminate the possibility of plagiarism.

### **Student Feedback**

Every semester I ask all my online students to provide feedback about the course in general and discussion board assignments in particular. I ask them to indicate their most favorite and least favorite discussion board topic. I am always very curious to find out what students think of these assignments. The vast majority of students provide very positive feedback about the course, stress that discussion board assignments are interesting and intriguing, emphasize the fact that they read other students' writings. Here is an excerpt from a student feedback: 'The role-playing element is exciting, it gives the assignment a certain flare and dynamic and really gets you involved in the mindset of the time period from a writer's perspective. Thanks for an interesting assignment, totally refreshing; teachers usually have you just write about stuff without really having you get into the mindset of someone in the time period. I enjoyed reading other classmates' postings; it is really interesting to observe the way in which different students digest this assignment!' (Summer 2010, History of Art II, Southern Connecticut State University).

Students become motivated because of the discussion board assignments. For many the intriguing nature of the assignments provided the opportunity to display their creative talent as some of these postings attest: 'This was my first online class and I really enjoyed it, I learned a lot in a short amount of time. The discussion boards were interesting to write because I was able to use my creativity, I also enjoyed reading them.' (Summer 2010, History of Art I, Southern Connecticut State University). 'I enjoyed being in this class, this class and the discussions were very interesting. My favorite discussion was about role playing.' (Spring 2009, History of Art II, Albertus Magnus College). 'I really enjoyed the discussions for each chapter. I thought it was a great way for me to learn how each student understood the readings.' (Summer 2009, History of Art I, Southern Connecticut State University).

Judging from the responses provided by the students, they like assignments which involve personal and life situations; they consider them to be intriguing and intellectually stimulating.

My colleagues also find this approach useful. After a presentation at a workshop at one of the universities where I teach a solemn professor pronounced after a long pause: 'I am trying to think how I can personalize my assignments; I teach statistics.'

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