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An Architect's Foray into Honors

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An Architect's Foray into Honors

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Teaching the Creative Arts - the Small Picture

“As you know, I am a teacher which means really I am teaching myself and whatever rubs off, the student gets.”

—Louis Kahn (architect)

In universities across the country, faculty struggle with the task of bringing creative arts education into the Honors curriculum. I am, therefore, only one of many who have attempted this, and as an Architecture faculty member I can only truly speak to the introduction of visual material and visual awareness. In the course of teaching an Honors seminar, however, I have come to believe that there are, indeed, strategies which make teaching

creative arts in an Honors curriculum both possible and enjoyable. I also believe it can be done in such a way as to make the information both accessible and profound. Though I will not talk specifically about the seminar I teach, a brief description of its content is necessary to contextualize my broader observations.

Fundamentally the objective of the course is to increase students' awareness of the issues of site and landscape considered from many viewpoints and at a variety of scales. Ethical, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of site are explored in terms of the creation of wastelands, borderlands, and homelands, their larger significance, and their impact on our daily lives. This is an act of discovery that leads to speculation about landscapes of the future.

The course employs a highly visual form of learning, a method common in Architecture but less so in other fields. All lectures present information in a visual format (professional quality slides) in the belief that students' visual awareness and acuity are increased through this approach. Images shown in class highlight the relationships, juxtapositions, ironies, beauties, horrors, and mysteries of site and landscape, and assignments encourage students to record and critique similar issues through visual and graphic means. The primary goal is for the students to become keen observers and critics of their everyday world, a world they encounter most significantly and most frequently at a visual level.



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The Big Picture

“The work of students should not be directed to the solution of problems, but rather to sensing the nature of a thing. But you cannot know a nature without getting it out of your guts. You must sense what is, and then you can look up what other people think it is. What you sense must belong to you....”

—Louis Kahn (architect)

Obviously one of the most significant obstacles in teaching the creative arts (assuming the Honors students taking these classes are non-majors) is the difference in the dissemination, development, and final evaluation of information in the arts when compared to other fields. For instance the delivery of information in most fields is primarily verbal or written and a similar form of verbal or written response is expected. The closer this response is to a predetermined “right” answer, the more favorable a student’s evaluation. Furthermore, the presentation of information and the desired response to this information is primarily intellectual and objective. Evaluation is typically private (as in the assignment of a grade) and is relatively free of subjectivity, making it easy for students not only to know but also to understand the evaluation of their performance in a given class at any point in time.

In the creative arts, however, information is often provided visually (as in art and design), aurally (as in music and dance), or physically (as in dance and theater). The desired student response is sometimes verbal or written but more often is in a similar format, meaning either visual, aural, or physical. Very seldom is there a single “right” answer. This makes both the process and the product of the creative arts relatively indeterminate. As a result it is often difficult to assign grades to numerous discrete portions of coursework that adequately indicate how well a student is performing. Evaluation is often public, taking the form of critical group reviews or exhibitions, public rehearsals and performances, etc. Though student response to a given assignment should certainly be defensible in objective and intellectual terms, it is usually deemed inadequate if it is not also emotive and visceral. Since these qualities are difficult to measure in strictly objective terms, often evaluations are or at least seem to be highly subjective. While this type of evaluation is not necessarily less fair or effective than a more objective quantitative method, it does require greater maturity, participation, and awareness on the part of students in order to understand fully how well they are performing as well as how to improve their performance.



The Nitty Gritty

“You and I are molded by the land, the trees, the sky and all that surrounds us; the streets, the houses.... Our hearts are shaped by the plaster walls that cover us and we reflect plaster wall ideals.... When I make a vase, a cup, or a saucer they will be my expression and they will tell you who I am and what I am.”

—Bernard Maybeck (architect)



Given the obstacles outlined in the preceding paragraphs, why would Honors students choose to expose themselves to the somewhat foreign and potentially unsettling educational method and course content of the creative arts? It is the drive to express themselves that students most often cite as the reason for taking such courses, courses that many enter, nevertheless, with a fair amount of trepidation. Some wish to reengage an artistic interest they pursued earlier in their education but gave up for lack of time as they entered their college major. For others it is a simple curiosity fueled by the awareness that college is an ideal time to expose themselves to as many things as possible. And then there are some who, by their own admission, have no particular interest in the arts but are simply looking for a course with less reading and fewer tests. Whatever the initial motivation, I've found there are some effective ways to engage these students as they enter this sometimes strange, new world.

1. Let students know immediately that the creative arts are as teachable and learnable as chemistry, business, psychology, or any other field. Insistence on this fact will counterbalance the pervading myth that innate talent alone qualifies people to participate in the arts.

In order for this to happen, the educational process itself needs to be as transparent as possible. Explaining to students what skills and knowledge are fundamental to the class and how this information will be taught helps them understand what they need to know and how they will come to know it. It is also useful to tell students the format in which information will be disseminated (i.e. through readings, lectures, demonstrations, etc.). Finally it helps to articulate the reason specific exercises and assignments are given and how each assignment links to those both before and after it.

In addition to addressing the issues above, one should also explain the importance of persistence and practice in the creative arts and the process of developing skill through patience and repetition, whether a project is undertaken individually or collaboratively. It's helpful to stress that students are not expected to have a specific set of knowledge or skills coming in but that they are expected to learn and improve significantly as the course progresses.

2. Integrate teaching methods familiar to students with those that might seem more foreign.

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This approach might mean starting with a more verbal method and moving gradually but purposefully toward visual, aural, or physical methods of both disseminating and requiring information. It could also mean introducing new methods from the beginning but balancing them throughout with verbal and written information and requirements. Either way there is some familiar ground on which the students can stand while they explore new content and methods of learning.

For example, in the course I teach I start out with a writing assignment addressing issues inherent in the course content. The following week I introduce more visual components but ones that seem somewhat familiar (journal keeping, collage). Later requirements for the course include a visual presentation, and the final requirement is a purely visual exhibition of the work of the semester, an assignment with no verbal content whatsoever. By that time the students are usually comfortable letting their visual work speak for them, whereas early in the semester they couldn't have imagined doing so.

3. Present the arts in a way that makes them relevant to the focus of the Honors curriculum. In other words, teaching students the creative arts may be the means to an end rather than the end in itself. The goals of the course should align with the goals of the Honors curriculum, which might be anything from increased multicultural awareness to a commitment to community service.

This approach may require alteration or reformatting of the specific skills and lessons of your field of the creative arts to make them specifically relevant to an overarching set of Honors topics. For example, my particular area of focus within architecture encompasses issues of site and landscape. In developing a course for Honors students, most of whom are not architecture majors, I decided to couch this topic in terms of not only the physical, but also the cultural, economic, and social aspects of site and landscape. This approach was consistent with my Honors program's emphasis on cultural studies and social issues designed to make students more educated and active citizens. The resulting seminar gives me the opportunity to teach students to be more visually aware of their world but also makes sense as part of a holistic curriculum. As another part of the attempt to contextualize the information I'm presenting, we take a field trip to a local "wasteland," a neighborhood stricken by poverty and violence, and talk to architects and planners there who have been working with the community to solve their problems in culturally and physically appropriate ways. Seeing this neighborhood firsthand, with its broken glass and vacant houses, is an experience that is both strongly visual and specifically parallel to the type of exposure supported by the Honors curriculum.

4. Encourage students to apply the creative and artistic skills and information they're learning to their own field of study.

One of the greatest potentials of introducing the creative arts (or, indeed, of introducing any new perspective) is the opportunity to use this information as a lens to understand familiar or old information in an unfamiliar or new way. There are aspects of symmetry, balance, rhythm, syncopation, composition, repetition and order not only in the arts but also in almost every other field of study. Similarly, most fields

have aspects of movement and stasis, sound, light, and space. And, indeed, most fields do have at least some subjective aspects, instances in which a creative leap of faith is required to move forward. The challenge is for students to identify the issues within their chosen major that parallel or overlap issues inherent in the creative arts. This overlap makes the arts seem more relevant, understandable, and applicable and, perhaps more significantly, sometimes opens the familiar ground of a student's field of study and reveals it to be more multidimensional than it had previously appeared.

One way I ensure this crossover in my seminar is to require a visual presentation on a topic within the students' majors (or at least within their current body of knowledge—information introduced somewhere other than in my class). I also ask them to engage in exercises addressing issues and methods common to many fields in addition to architecture and design (e.g., mapping), and we discuss the different forms a single issue or activity can take depending on the field in which it is applied.

5. Teach by example.

It's difficult to teach the creative arts successfully simply by telling students what to do and expecting them to do it. While this may seem obvious, it's easy to forget since most faculty are accustomed to teaching within a curriculum that usually ensures that students have some background that will enable them to understand new material fairly readily or help them approach unfamiliar tasks or assignments. Generally speaking, most students' prior experiences both in the classroom and out have ill prepared them for the type of undertakings associated with the creative arts. Since the arts are no more instinctively understood by most students than chemistry or physics, they require active and specific instruction.

Students need to be shown as well as told what to do. Exhibits of both strong and weak examples of work similar to that required for the class and explanation of what makes each more or less successful are extremely helpful. Direct, critical, and frequent evaluation of the students' own work as they begin to produce it is essential. Evidence of the development of the work of previous classes over the course of a semester is also valuable in making it clear that significant improvement is both possible and expected. This motivates students and reduces some of their anxiety about the initial quality of their own work.

In my seminar I bring in examples of collages I have done as well as student collages from past years. I bring in this work in part to level the playing field somewhat for the students who often feel quite vulnerable when asked to express themselves creatively, usually in an unfamiliar medium. Introduction of this work allows us to talk openly about issues of vulnerability, and it increases the students' comfort level to know they are not alone in these feelings but must learn to overcome them.

In addition to these measures, I ensure that all written assignments I distribute have a graphic component. My lectures are also fully visual (I typically show 80-120 slides in a fifty-minute lecture) and are discussed as models for the visual presentations the students are asked to make near the end of the semester. Making the materials and format of the class relevant to the work being asked of the students and constantly confronting them with visual language heightens their awareness of this form of communication and aids them in their own work.

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The Desired Outcome

“And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
T.S. Eliot (poet)

The students in my seminar are not likely to become architects or urban planners. But it's reasonable to imagine they might some day be involved citizens within their communities or passionate clients engaged in architectural projects, and they need to be equipped accordingly. The information and visual design skills they need to fill that role differ significantly from the skills and information architecture majors need. The Honors students need a big picture understanding they'll retain rather than dates and details they'll quickly forget. More than anything else, they need to come away from the experience instilled with confidence in their ability to participate in the arts.



The Honors student who takes a course in the creative arts and decides to become a musician or actor or artist will be as rare as the student who decides to become an architect. But all will be definitively richer for the experience. Certainly they will have a greater understanding of those of us who are not scientists or businessmen, for those of us drawing more on the right than the left side of the brain. The best case scenario, however, goes well beyond that to imagine they might even become better scientists and businessmen because of their exposure to the arts. Perhaps they will look at things and understand them in a slightly different way than before and as a result be more creative and adept problem-solvers. It is through this kind of enlarged understanding or synergy that we can all imbue our work, whatever that may be, with greater resonance and meaning. This, to me, is a powerful incentive to make the arts part of every Honors curriculum.

Note

All images shown are the work of students in my course.

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