

2012

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Leda Cempellin

South Dakota State University, leda.cempellin@sdstate.edu

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Cempellin, Leda, "Turning Challenges into Gold: Cross-Listing Introductory Honors with Advanced Classes in the Visual Arts" (2012). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 151.
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Turning Challenges into Gold: Cross-Listing Introductory Honors with Advanced Classes in the Visual Arts

LEDA CEMPELLIN
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Jim Lacey has offered an insight on the benefits of challenging courses for honors students: he prefers to think of an honors course not as a highly specialized, intensive-writing, and discipline-specific academic course but as the ideal general education course: “The courses themselves, I believe, should be challenging, different, and fun for instructors and students alike. When possible, they should be team taught and interdisciplinary; they should involve off-campus activities; and, instead of papers and exams, they should feature projects, preferably in teams” (79). During the early planning stages of the new course called *Museum Experience* at South Dakota State University, the faculty member serving as project director had all these components in mind. While this course was specific to the honors college and institutional context of SDSU, its conception, development, and implementation offer an example of how an honors course can evolve from the merger of national ideals with local needs.

BACKGROUND: TAKING ON A NEW CHALLENGE

The honors college at South Dakota State University (a public land-grant institution of almost 13,000 students) is well integrated with numerous departments and programs. Currently including over 350 students and still expanding, the honors college offers general education courses, interdisciplinary colloquia, and contracted upper-division classes that integrate the regular course content with opportunities for research, service, leadership, and travel. In order to graduate with honors college distinction, students entering the college must complete fifteen credits of honors general education (lower-division) courses, which are offered in collaboration with the respective departments, in addition to three to six upper-division credits within the students’ chosen major, three to six credits of honors colloquia, and three credits of research-driven honors independent study under supervision of a faculty mentor.

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In addition to regular offerings of art appreciation classes in large-size classroom settings and online, the Department of Visual Arts at South Dakota State University periodically offers a small-size class specifically for honors students. Art Appreciation is an introductory theoretical course at the lower-division level, aimed at teaching students how to look at art. Like the regular art appreciation courses, the honors section fulfills a general education requirement for graduation and does not have any prerequisites; therefore, it can be taken by any honors students, regardless of their chosen major. Aligned with the vision of the honors dean, Timothy Nichols, that “Honors is an enriched, challenging, personalized pathway that allows talented, motivated students in any major to make the most of their academic experience at SDSU” <<http://www.sdstate.edu/honors/deans-welcome.cfm>>, the honors art appreciation course strives to push both students and faculty outside their comfort zones. In the words of Alexander Werth, faculty members involved in teaching honors courses in general have the unique opportunity “to explore new pedagogical strategies and settings” (44).

The honors art appreciation section, scheduled for spring 2011, was facing a challenge in the estimated enrollment number. A mutual desire to accommodate those honors students that were choosing a course in the visual arts activated a constructive dialogue between the dean of the honors college, the head of the visual arts department, and the honors art history faculty, culminating in the decision to take on an outstanding challenge by cross-listing the 100-level honors art appreciation course with a new 400-level special topic course in the visual arts. The cross-listed section was initially conceived as a one-time occurrence to solve a temporary issue. The title *Museum Experience* chosen for the new course would allow the instructor ample margins for creative logistic solutions within course planning, at the same time providing a unique experience to the cross-listed honors students.

The instructor of the new course, a notorious risk-taker in undergraduate research with a recent record of co-curatorial experiences in collaboration with the South Dakota Art Museum, enthusiastically embraced this challenge as an opportunity for development in the area of museum studies, new to our visual arts program.

EARLY HONORS AND MATURE ART/GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENTS: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CROSS-LISTING

The newly created cross-listed class included two diverse groups of students. The first group was composed of five honors students seeking to satisfy a general education requirement for their lower-division honors courses required for graduation with honors college distinction. Most of them were unfamiliar with the museum world and art in general. However, honors students are “generally the brightest and most able, the hardest-working and most highly

motivated" (Werth 43–44); a combination of these factors constitutes a good promise of successful completion and positive outcomes for new risk-taking enterprises.

The other group of nine students, who enrolled in the special topics class Museum Experience, mostly comprised upper-division students from our visual arts department (fine arts, graphic design, and art education), who chose this course as an elective. Before the semester began, the course instructor made several visits to art and graphic design classes within the department to promote the new spring course, emphasizing that students enrolling in this course would have a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the art museum's professional dynamics 'behind the scenes' and to learn about career opportunities that are not explored within our regular program. The class effectively attracted skilled, ambitious, and creative achievers who were motivated by both the novelty of the course and the opportunity to expand their knowledge on museum-related careers.

Once the new topics course was identified as involving a close collaboration with the art museum, some major challenges surfaced related to the composition of the cross-listed section and the diverse academic needs. The first challenge was to accommodate the needs of both academically precocious lower-division honors students and upper-division students in the visual arts, whose problem-solving skills have been nurtured by years of practice within a studio environment.

Honors students first needed to learn those basic visual elements and principles of design that constitute a major goal of an art appreciation course; such information would be redundant for upper-division art and graphic design students, who had taken an art appreciation course years before, had heard about these elements over and over again in their other visual arts core courses, and had learned how to apply them in real-life situations such as their own painting or graphic design work. A few intensive lectures on art appreciation theory were scheduled during the first weeks of the semester so that honors students could rapidly catch up with some basic elements necessary to talk and write about art. The challenge was to make advanced visual arts students understand that some initial redundancy was necessary for the two classes to work successfully on a new project together and to trust that honors students would compensate by contributing their scholarly skills later on. This challenge was exacerbated by that fact that our visual arts students are not very familiar with the honors college. A 2009 study by Beata M. Jones and Peggy W. Watson indicates the gap between honors and academically specialized students: "These [latter] students often choose pragmatic approaches to their university education, enrolling in courses that directly relate to their professions rather than the liberal-arts courses that are the staple of university honors programs' offerings" (53).

The second challenge was to prevent honors students from being intimidated and dropping the class; a climate of reciprocal trust was essential so that

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students felt they would successfully get through a course structure that was complex and multilayered, knowing that the many pieces of the puzzle would give a clear picture only later in the semester.

In approaching these two unavoidable challenges, the instructor focused on combining diverse strengths, envisioning a set of common goals that required different skills from each of the student groups or both. The course would rotate around basic elements from three disciplines: art appreciation; art history and criticism; and museum studies. Through art appreciation lectures and class discussions, honors students would learn how to give a meaningful interpretation of an artwork by analyzing the choice, arrangement, and intrinsic dynamics of the visual elements line, space, light, and color as well as their correlation to the design principles of unity and variety, emphasis and subordination, scale and proportion.

Another component of the course included selected basic readings in museum studies, aimed at arousing discussions on the diversification of roles and responsibilities within the museum profession, the process of exhibition development, typologies of space layout, conservation challenges for contemporary ephemeral artworks, different categories of museum visitors, and the differentiated marketing strategies used to target one category or the other. Classroom lectures and discussions on theoretical aspects of art appreciation and museum studies alternated with local tours to the South Dakota Art Museum and meetings with the museum staff members so that students could learn about the museum as a whole and curatorial practices.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE THROUGH A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT: MENTORING HONORS STUDENTS WHO BECOME MENTORS THEMSELVES

In order to make sense of the diverse components of this course through application to a real-life situation, the instructor, in dialogue with the art museum's curator, envisioned a service-learning project aimed at producing a catalogue to accompany an exhibition planned for the month of April at the South Dakota Art Museum. With the title *Lynn Thorpe—Earth and Sky*, this special feature-exhibition of an artist resident in Rapid City was part of the South Dakota Artist Series.

All students in the cross-listed course were involved in writing and designing the catalogue. Visual arts students from the special topics class Museum Experience worked on the project as their primary class requirement. The project was also mandatory for honors students as an opportunity to learn art appreciation differently than in a regular course. Additionally, students were required to give a guided tour of the exhibit at the end of the semester.

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor applied for and was awarded a service-learning mini-grant by the Teaching Learning Center, aimed at

covering the publication of a small edition of the catalogue. Students received copies of the catalogue for inclusion in their professional portfolios.

All honors and visual arts students were required to write a small paper as their individual contribution to the catalogue essay, each focusing on the analysis of two or three selected images of Lynn Thorpe's work in the exhibition and comparing them with the work of one major modern artist. The instructor provided a list of plausible influences, along with a draft bibliography, as part of the initial orientation for the project. She later edited the catalogue essay by collecting the individual papers, grouping them according to the reference artists chosen, and selecting some parts to combine into four longer essays framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Students observed the progressive growth of the project from their brief individual papers to a larger and complex essay, an invaluable lesson for honors students as they saw how writing projects can grow from small pieces into an ambitious structure resembling a book.

Within the cross-listed class, four advanced graphic design students, endowed with a strong level of self-confidence and determination, chose to take on the challenge of designing the catalogue. The class was divided into four layout teams, each assigned to one graphic design student who served as layout project manager. Each team proposed a competitive layout for the catalogue. The catalogue layouts underwent jurying by two museum staff members and one graphic design teacher designated by the project director. The winning catalogue was published with the mini-grant funds.

Opposite to the individual approach required by the catalogue essays, the competitive layouts were team efforts. The role of honors students in these tasks was to observe and provide input in team discussions while the responsibility for successfully completing the task fell on the four advanced graphic design students. Honors students had the golden opportunity to observe the process of developing a discipline-specific project, with the visual arts students serving as mentors. During one class session, the advanced graphic design students started the project in Photoshop or InDesign in front of their teams while honors students took part in discussions of, for instance, what image to choose for the cover of the catalogue. When the four layouts were completed, the instructor required each project manager to give a class presentation of his/her layout project, explaining the vision and rationale behind all the major choices, e.g., the image for the cover, the typography, and the distribution of images within the text. Another layer of mentorship was added in the following days when one of the layouts' co-jurors, a senior graphic design professor, visited the class twice and performed two single-blind peer-review sessions, sharing his professional expertise through extensive suggestions for further improvement.

Through this multi-step feedback process, honors students observed several layers of professionalism within one discipline, learning the invaluable and humbling lesson that professional growth is virtually unlimited. As Jay Freyman wrote, "Honors students have an *interest* in learning, which they see both as an ongoing process and as an end in itself, not merely as a means to something

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else” (25). The intrinsic complexity of this cross-listed course aimed at nourishing this professional attitude in multiple forms.

The exhibition preparation and catalogue project were occurring at the same time, so lectures and activities were alternating throughout some crucial periods of the semester. Everyone in the class was a learner, even the instructor. By working closely with professionals in other fields, faculty members teaching honors courses have “the opportunity to learn and practice new pedagogical methods” (Werth 45), further enriching their professional skills. The instructor learned as much as the students did when the museum curator visited the class to show the “virtual exhibition layout”—i.e., the placement of all the illustrations from Lynn Thorpe’s work on walls designed on the computer—to preview the exhibition and finalize the layout settings. The curator showed three possible layouts to the class: one with each wall featuring all the paintings in either horizontal or vertical format; one with the paintings arranged on the walls according to alternating horizontal and vertical shapes; and finally one in which each wall featured two horizontal paintings on the external borders and two vertical ones together in the middle or vice versa. The curator then asked students to provide feedback on the three layouts, saying which one they preferred and by providing a rationale. This exercise allowed honors students, who were learning about the arrangement of shapes and colors within one painting, to imagine the entire wall as a *gestalt*, analyzing how four artworks placed on a wall affected each other in the same terms of shapes and color. The curator’s idea of presenting three possible real-life scenarios from which to choose was an important pedagogical strategy for the instructor to observe, and it evoked a great class discussion.

Art appreciation courses are particularly suitable for combining theory and practice through various and diverse activities. In 2007, Joe Thomas of Clarion University of Pennsylvania reported his experience with an honors introductory class to the visual arts titled *Art and Imagination*. In this course, he alternated the traditional study of visual elements and principles of design with such diverse outcomes as a written analysis of an artwork found on campus; a written exhibition review modeled on major art magazines found in the library; visits to the university’s art gallery and to department studios; and hands-on experiences such as creative drawing assignments followed by exhibition of the best work produced during the semester (Register, Bullington, and Thomas 37–44). Having honors students in Art and Imagination, initially unfamiliar with art practices, produce artworks in class and then see them featured in an exhibition produced an effect like that for honors students in Museum Experience, who could see their essays shaped into an artistic layout and then published.

An interesting consequence of this class was that, at the end of the semester, honors students had naturally developed mentoring abilities. During the last week of class, all the students gave a tour of the exhibition to a scheduled group composed of high school students from North Dakota. After the tour, honors students asked the high school students questions about their future career

goals and then explained the special opportunities offered by SDSU's honors college, including this museum course.

CONCLUSION

In informal and anonymous evaluations of the course, some honors students expressed their initial concern about the novelty of the class and about the essay-writing project, fearing that they did not have enough competence to write in a discipline that was completely new to them. Some students also expressed concerns about the exhibition tour because it involved a certain amount of improvisation.

Another challenge that some of the honors students perceived related to anxieties about changes in the syllabus, but they were able to adapt fairly well to the inevitable fluctuations in a course like this because, as one student wrote, "we were given enough notice to adjust and prepare." Honors students, who are used to high organizational levels, were approaching a complex project that involved a number of different components and constituencies. Even though the activities were planned in advance and well scheduled, the instructor had to maintain flexibility. With a complex set of circumstances organically evolving throughout the semester, rapid changes and adaptations were necessary in order to make the most of each day. By observing the implementation of the course schedule through a good balance between organization and flexibility, honors students received training on one of the essential qualities that Jay Freyman lists as paramount to being a successful honors student: "*Patience*—An honors student should have the patience to defer, if need be, the satisfaction of wants and the patience, at all times, to listen to and to consider seriously all sides of an issue" (26). This skill allowed honors students to make sense of evolving situations, unexpected changes and incoming challenges. Despite the challenges, the honors students unanimously praised the course, understanding the combination of theory and practice provided by class lectures and assigned readings that alternated with outside-class activities at the art museum and direct involvement in a museum activity through the exhibition catalogue.

Honors students also praised as "good learning opportunities" the mentorship experiences provided by the combination of the two classes and by the exhibition layout team project. One honors student appreciated the opportunity to provide input on the best exhibition layout, and all the honors students were particularly proud of the scholarly work they accomplished on the catalogue: one wrote, "Having my name in a printed piece—wow." In the end, honors students thoroughly enjoyed the experience, as evidenced by these comments: "I'm not sure I would have learned the same thing in a regular art appreciation class" and "We accomplished a lot this semester. It felt a little rushed at times, but we made it and learned *a lot*."

The course also received enthusiastic responses from the dean of the honors college, the head of the visual arts department, the art museum staff members, the teaching learning center, and the artist Lynn Thorpe. Two visual arts

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students in the special topics class became summer interns at the museum, where they were praised for their excellence. All the parties involved expressed a desire to have the magic of this one-time experience repeated.

Repeating such a course is not easy, however. Structuring an entire course around a semester-long project that involves an outside institution (the art museum), needs the fortunate concurrence of numerous factors, which in our specific case included: a match between the academic and museum calendars so that an exhibition is scheduled for inauguration toward the end of the semester and can be observed from its conception; a solo exhibition, usually simpler in structure than a group exhibition; an artist willing to cooperate and release all the necessary permissions; and a cohesive body of contemporary artworks with numerous and diverse ties to art history that can be easily identified and investigated. The instructor is aware that, in such uncharted territory, structuring an innovative course combining honors and visual art students needs to include new typologies of projects and new cross-listing combinations to get the necessary blend of skills.

The specific experience of this new 'dream course' has revealed that extending the cross-listing structure, which is a common practice in studio art, to honors classes that meet general education requirements can provide an invaluable experience for honors students. Indeed, cross-listing lower-division honors classes with upper-division discipline-specific classes has the potential more generally to provide honors students with an early understanding of specific careers, forms of mentorship at different levels, and high-level skills. For the instructor, such a course is an opportunity to learn new pedagogies and apply them to creating a unique academic experience for students of diverse skills and backgrounds.

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The author may be contacted at

Leda.Cempellin@sdstate.edu.