

Department of Art and Design General Education Assessment Report

Art 112: Introduction to the Visual Arts 2008-2009

I. Art 112 and the Marshall University Mission

Introduction to the Visual Arts teaches students a vocabulary and frame of reference for informed and critical response to works of visual art. It also greatly expands their range of experience by presenting them with architecture, fine crafts, industrial design, graphic design, photography, printmaking and other forms of visual art in addition to the painting and sculpture which they enter the course expecting to see. By approaching art through visual logic, technical, historical and cultural approaches, Art 112 helps students understand works of art as products of changing societies and technologies even more than as the works of individuals of great sensibility, intelligence, even genius. It reflects the Mission of the university above all in the aim “to participate in activities such as artistic and cultural programs,” “to appreciate and to cultivate diversity, and to value differences,” and in critical thinking and analytical experience. Further, it reflects the Mission of the College of Fine Arts and the “arts appreciation” courses’ learning outcomes to: “1.) converse about various art forms using the language of the fine arts to convey ideas; 2.) demonstrate that students know basic arts elements and that they recognize them in works of art regardless of the cultural context they come from; 3.) articulately and critically respond to works of art to reflect observation and critical thinking; and 4.) that they be provided direct experiences with works of fine art in exhibition and performance.”

II. General Education Component and Student Learning Outcomes

There generally are 10-14 sections of Art 112 offered per semester and, since 2007, their syllabi have been for the most part consistent. Thus, we share learning outcomes:

On completion of this course, students should be able to: 1. form and articulate ideas about art based on fact; 2. use appropriate vocabulary to describe and explain the use and effects of the visual elements (line, shape, texture, color and space) and to analyze the compositions of works of art (especially the use and effects of balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, variety and repetition); and 3. explain how the formal elements and principles of design contribute to expression in works of art.

In addition, there are extremely desirable but less quantifiable outcomes that we enumerate nevertheless for emphasis:

Desired Outcomes: This course should help students to: 1. increase their visual literacy and awareness that it extends far beyond art; 2. be aware that they are consumers of art, reproductions of art and other visual images; 3. understand that art arises from and reflects a cultural context while also contributing to it; 4. understand that works of art and the principles of design influence daily life in many respects; and 5. understand that works of art provide access to and understanding of other cultures and other times.

This course is completely unlike any that most students have encountered elsewhere. In some respects it is a foreign language course, introducing visual culture and traditions, as well as visual logic. It collides

with their expectations and assumptions: because they use their eyes all the time it never crosses their minds that they are visually illiterate, that they look but do not see. A world of visual traditions awaits them, embedded in many facets of modern culture.

Assessment Activities

A. Assessment Measures (Tools)

Assessment of Art 112 used to rely on outside readers' evaluation of student essays. The readers were strongly influenced by the quality of writing and by the divergent assignments, so their evaluations were at times variable. In Spring 2008 we instituted a 30-question, multiple-choice exam administered to all sections over a two-week period after the last day students can drop a course. After an experimental version in Fall 2007, the first test administered across the board had 30 objective questions and some images for projection. This proved cumbersome. A new test was constructed as a result of meetings with all Art 112 faculty members, who each contributed questions and answers. After Spring 08 we reviewed results as a group and made minor alterations to questions that we thought (or student responses indicated) were less effective than they ought to be. We added photocopied illustrations to the question pages, eliminating some of the logistical problems of administering the test. We conscientiously sought to make questions reflect not only the Student Learning Outcomes but also to vary in complexity: some demand mastery of one group of concepts and terms applied to an example, others require more synthesis of ideas and principles; a third set necessitates real integration of ideas with critical thinking. Much in art is a matter of nuances but our test is clearly too nuanced for our students. Test construction by committee is less than perfect: it led to a test that is much too demanding. The faculty thought this preferable to aiming too low. (The test given in Spring 2009 has been used again in Fall 2009, so future comparison will be correlate directly.)

Benchmarks

Our aim was to see what concepts the majority of our students had mastered, so for each objective we hoped a mean of 50% correct answers on any topic but results too often fell short because of the test's difficulty. At this point, we are assessing the test as much as student achievement. We have met and discussed where we think corrections need to be made. In some cases there are still some concepts and works that not everyone covers, or covers sufficiently, so greater classroom consistency will result. In other cases we will make some minor revisions to the test, to some questions and even more answers; we plan to demand synthesis and subtlety on fewer questions hoping that student scores increase considerably.

B. Results/Analysis

Spring 08 (experiment, 4 sections): mean score	48.7
Fall 08 (new test): mean score	64.8
Spring 09 (slightly refined test): mean score	58.3

Fall 08 averaged correct responses by question: 54.6

Spring 09 averaged correct responses by question: 58.3

The attached chart indicates the general content of each question and its answers, as well as the types of outcomes it involves. To the right are columns indicating the averaged percentages of correct responses to each question in Fall 2008, then in Spring 2009.

C. Analysis/Planned Action

The Situation: In 2007, when sections of this course began to be coordinated by a participating faculty member, the variables between sections were enormous despite shared learner outcomes: some sections raced through 22 chapters of a textbook while one ambled through several of another text; one had 8-10 students, another had 60 and most had 40-45. Courses met one, two or three times a week, on campus, off campus and virtually. The range of instructor experience is also vast: some sections were taught by graduate teaching assistants who were without teaching experience, some by adjuncts (elementary school teachers to retirees), and yet others by full time university faculty members with decades of experience; their educations were in art education, studio (applied) art, art history or comparative arts. As a result, some inconsistency must exist and is probably beneficial, especially when the teachers interact.

Since Spring 2008: All sections had begun to use the same textbook, the same outcomes and objectives and the same general syllabus while striving to keep two-thirds of the contents consistent while the last third is variable (approaching subjects by medium and/or history). We meet monthly during the semester, introducing and providing training in new procedures (we all use rubrics now and MUOnline), materials or equipment, sometimes discussing any problems faculty members encounter or presenting material about subjects like feminist theory in art, visual culture vs. visual literacy, patriotic images, public art on campus and our region. We are noticing an increase in the number of Hispanic students and, based on how responsive African-American students are to use of African examples, we plan to discuss some aspects of Hispanic art and culture soon.

Having reached general consistency in content we now are focusing on better and more consistent results. How much direct experience students have with works of art in the Birke Art Gallery, at the Huntington Museum of Art and elsewhere (including in the department, where there are works visible all the time, and some faculty members bring works into the classroom for examination) depends on the section and what is available in a particular semester; some take students and present information about works there while others send students with assignments.

We still have considerable work ahead in raising the level of achievement. The results of the assessment test clearly indicate some questions and content that need serious attention. The majority of our students are freshmen who came through No Child Left Behind. Most are without study and note-taking skills and resist pressure to meet demands because they have never been held accountable in school before. This is an extremely serious problem with ramifications far beyond school. In the face of that we are, however, enriching and expanding the content of the course in the hope of stirring students in

various ways and, at the same time, we are seeking to assess what we achieve more accurately and effectively.

Planned Action

Scheduling and space cause many problems in the Dept. of Art & Design and limit meetings of Art 112 faculty members. There are various steps we need to take beginning next semester, as well as some we have already initiated:

1. Training of new teachers has become more systematic and received increased attention in the last two years but must remain high on the agenda. (If there is only one new faculty member, especially an unavoidably late appointment, it is difficult to prepare a studio artist well for this type of classroom experience.) Personal situations have compromised some teacher performance and turn-over is inevitable, whether it resulted from graduation of energetic and idealistic teaching assistants, pregnancy or other reasons for attrition.
2. We are fortunate to have a cadre of experienced teachers; it is essential that we continue expanding and keeping every one of them vital in the classroom. New information and materials, as well as positive interaction among the faculty as a group—sometimes similar to the really stimulating times of graduate school--help keep the experienced from getting stale.
3. Having identified areas of weakness on the assessment test we can now turn to targeting those content areas for improvement in successive semesters. This will be addressed in teacher training and then implemented in individual teachers' classes. Beginning in Spring 2010, we will focus extra attention on the visual elements, planning to maintain that and add more focus on the principles of design in Fall 2010.
4. While already trying to compensate in the classroom for weak areas in 08-09 test results, we will look at fall 09 results as well and act accordingly. Due to various flus and students' grasp of the impossibility of enforcing attendance policies, everyone reports enormous numbers of absences and resultant lowered quality of student work.
5. The other side of the process is the scrutiny of the test that we continued to use for several semesters in order to track results longer term. That began in a meeting the week after Thanksgiving. We will eliminate a few terms and one example that every section does not cover. In addition, we will heighten the differences between answers, minimizing some of the nuance. Other remedies may also emerge as we work. (Some blamed the poorly photocopied illustrations for poor performance on the test until, in Fall 09, a faculty member supplemented them with projected images, but no noteworthy improvement resulted.)

6. We continue to focus on making the course more obviously relevant to students by taking a broad, cultural approach, especially in explanation of examples. Visual literacy and the influence of the visual elements and principles of design on all aspects of life, especially in the civic and consumer spheres, will be emphasized. Agreeing to include architecture in every section has already increased the obvious relevance of our material to daily life. Expanding discussion of graphic and industrial design in our meetings and encouraging their inclusion in the course by providing images with information for classroom use should be helpful as well.

We envision adapting the course to align it with the new core curriculum. This will entail more clearly articulating our goals and methods, but we believe we are closer to the new standards than is evident on paper. As a group, we know that this course is thoroughly concerned with questions of aesthetics as well as critical thinking skills.

III. Overview of changes implemented since last report. Not yet applicable as this is the first report in this format or to cover multiple semesters.

IV. Assistance Need with Assessment

Surely there are more technical, statistical analyses of results possible, though how useful they would be is uncertain. We need above all to stress what we have show to be effective in classes and work to find other ways of engaging the minds of our students, using technologies to advantage as much as possible.