

Spring 2016 Sabbatical Report

Submitted by Karen Whitney

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The Art and Visual Culture in Modern Life class (Art 101) serves approximately 1500 students each year, is taught by ten faculty members, and has been rewritten several times since its inception in 1968. It has become a course which, although it transfers as an art appreciation course, is not taught using the older and traditional “art appreciation” methods that include media-based surveys or mini historical chronologies. Both of these approaches fail to convey the everyday relevance of art to our student body at El Camino College. The approach of the curriculum since the 1990s has been thematic, allowing students exposure to multiple cultures and time periods within the perspective of key social concepts. Since the turn of the millennium, the study of art history has grown to include newer frameworks for critical inquiry. Specifically, the study of visual culture has become more important as our own society has become less concerned with the significance of “high art” alone and has simultaneously become more interested in popular culture, mass media, and the visuals of digital technology. The inclusion of visual culture in textbooks, however, has not occurred at the same pace and depth as is required for our students to fully understand key concepts of its study. I have spent the sabbatical leave researching introductory books on visual culture and have written a four-chapter reader that supplements the current thematic textbook. I have been piloting the reader with two Art 101 sections this fall semester and am pleased with the results thus far.

Over the last decade, the art history faculty has experimented with a number of texts in an effort to find one that addresses all content areas including the main framework concepts of visual culture. Our currently adopted text by Margaret Lazzari discusses visual culture in about

three pages of the text which not enough for students to get a full idea. Conversely, there are introductory visual culture texts, however, they are usually more appropriate for upper division coursework and are too theoretical for our incoming student body. Due to the polarity in choices available, the reader I have assembled tries to introduce theoretical frameworks for visual analysis with less jargon, streamlined descriptions of relevant vocabulary, and relatable visual examples. In doing so I have depended on the recommendations of my art history colleagues, specifically Ali Ahmadpour, whose sabbatical research led him to recommend *Practices of Looking* by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright as a strong source for understanding visual culture. As a result, my writing depended heavily on Sturken and Cartwright's text, but streamlined it more for easier reading and thematic application.

As I have piloted the reader with students this semester I have already identified some ways it has helped students and some areas for improvement. They have currently only read three of the four chapters (those which applied to our first unit), but I have sent out a preliminary survey to get feedback on readability, length, and its overall usefulness to understanding course concepts. From their responses I've learned that approximately 42% of my students this semester do not claim English as their first language. This is somewhat surprising to me and, while the sample size is still small, it reaffirms the importance of having a reader that clarifies difficult concepts. Just under half said they spent 1-2 hours per week reading. While this is under the recommended outside class reading time, it does not take into consideration the reading of the primary textbook from which they also had assignments. Generally, 1-2 hours a week sounds correct based on the length of each reading assignment. About 10% of students said they spent 3-4 hours a week, which tells me some concepts could still be streamlined. 88% of students thought that the length of each chapter was the appropriate. Concision was my goal so

as to engage students without overwhelming them with the hopes that they actually would complete the reading. Students have given good feedback like “include more images” and “define vocabulary words in the margins” which could be helpful as I work on revisions.

In researching the appropriate primary sources for visual culture, I have digitally compiled a number of those sources for other Art 101 instructors’ use. An honors version of the Art 101 curriculum has been proposed by my colleagues and I believe these resources could facilitate the writing of that curriculum. The compilation of the significant primary sources would be available to whomever teaches the class once it becomes approved curriculum.

I also spent some of the sabbatical time researching best pedagogical practices to improve my in-class delivery and follow-up to the read material. In the past I have tried various approaches beyond lecture including the “flipped” classroom, small group discussions, and group projects, however I found research on the efficacy of “peer instruction.” It concluded that it helps students understand concepts when they explain it to someone else and hearing another student’s interpretation of the material can also help with clarity. As peers in the classroom, students are likely to understand each other, while instructors are often too entrenched in their own jargon to rephrase concepts in relatable ways. I have organized classroom time around the implementation of peer instruction sessions and have assigned credit value to their participation. I see the potential value in this kind of approach, but need to continue to refine the structure of the peer instruction sessions.

I feel the reader as a first edition product for student use meets the goals of my sabbatical project. Classroom discussions were enriched because students came with a better understanding of key concepts than could be provided by the Lazzari text alone. I plan to send out follow-up

surveys at the middle and end of the semester and then implementing suggestions for use in a revised edition for spring semester.

I am grateful to the sabbatical committee and academic affairs, and thank them for supporting this project and sabbatical leave. I have returned this semester with clear goals, and an enriched and expanded approach to the Art 101 curriculum which I have been teaching for thirteen years. I believe student engagement and understanding will benefit from this invested time.