Great Ideas for Teaching Proposal

Art Theory Review Pie
Originally used in Spring 2008
“Theories and Practices in Art History and Visual Culture”
VAH 240 (now VAH 2240)
2007 – 2008 full year session
Department of Visual Arts

In the spring of 2008 I found myself co-teaching a course in art history that is traditionally difficult for many students; “Theories and Practices in Art History and Visual Culture” does not, like most second year art history courses, focus on a series of artists, art works, and art movements but instead explores the theories and practices behind the visual arts and the conceptual framework of art history as a discipline. For many students the abstract nature of the content is challenging and seems to offer little in the way of practical application. It is because of such potential learning roadblocks that I frequently turned to active learning exercises in the instruction of this course. One of the most successful of these, the “Art Theory Review Pie,” was based on an exercise demonstrated at the “Teaching Critical Thinking” workshop at the Teaching Support Centre. Whereas the original version focused on an ethical issue and several potential solutions, the “Art Theory Review Pie” centered on a work of art and six potential ways to analyze it, giving the students a chance to review what they had been learning in class. The exercise challenged students to take the theories studied and apply them to a practical situation. While I used it specifically within the context of a review session, a similar activity could be adopted fruitfully to other in-class contexts. In a two-step process the students progressed from demonstrating basic knowledge, comprehension and application to delving into analysis, synthesis and evaluation; in other words, the activity called on all six of Benjamin Blooms levels of cognitive learning. Resources necessary for the activity were minimal (masking tape, six cue cards and a photocopy of an art-photograph), classroom time was a little more demanding (approximately thirty minutes) but was more than worth it given the results. Through the relatively simple exercise the students discovered the practical core to abstract theories in a relaxed classroom environment and the instructors were able to gauge the level of the students’ comfort with the material and thus address areas that needed further explanation.

The “Art Theory Review Pie” was used as part of an in-class review session a number of weeks prior to the scheduled final exam. In the first half of the three hour review session myself and the other instructor recapped some of the key ideas covered in the course over the year and fielded questions regarding the upcoming final examination, while the second portion of the class, following a brief break, was devoted to the “Art Theory Review Pie.” While the approximately thirty students had been on break I mapped out, using the masking tape, a circle on the floor and divided it into six equal pie pieces. Each pie piece contained a cue card, blank side facing up, on the reverse of which was written the name of one methodology studied in the course (formalism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, post-colonialism and post-structuralism). In the centre of the circle was a photocopied reproduction of Man Ray’s photograph The Violin d’Ingres.
When the students returned from their break I asked them to divide into groups of five and asked each group to stand in a pie section. Once arranged I relayed a brief history of the photograph, noting key biographical details about the artist as well as a brief context of the production of the work of art. I then explained the two-part process of the “Art Theory Review Pie”: in part one the students would use an assigned methodology to analyze the work of art as a group and then in part two they would be free to choose their preferred model from the six available. Upon turning over the cue cards to reveal which theory was contained within each pie piece the students were given ten minutes to discuss the theory and the art work amongst themselves, consulting their course notes and the instructors when more information was required. At the end of the ten minutes each group presented an informal analysis of the Man Ray work based on their assigned theoretical model. This first half of the activity tested the students’ retention of course materials, calling on skills such as basic knowledge, comprehension, and application, all fairly average skills for a review session. It was really the second part of the activity that challenged the students’ critical thinking skills. For the second half of the activity the students were asked to rearrange themselves within the circle according to the method that they felt provided the most relevant and revealing reading of the work of art. Once again the students were given approximately ten minutes to confer amongst themselves at the end of which they presented a brief analysis of the work of art. As a wrap up to the exercise students were asked, in an informal manner, to evaluate the different modes used. They were called upon to consider which models were more effective and if it would be possible to combine methods to arrive at a deeper understanding of the work of art. This last element of the activity was most illuminating as it called upon a deeper understanding of the material covered, but within a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere. Given the extensive lead up to the second portion of the activity, and the framing of it within the context of “the student’s preferred method,” the students felt more comfortable critically evaluating the models and even combing them into more complex theories without fear of “being wrong.” The second half of the exercise once again called on students’ retention, knowledge, comprehension and application, but also asked them to analyze, synthesize and finally evaluate the theories they had been studying.

While the exercise took up much space and a considerable amount of class time, it gave the students a chance to actively engage in what can be rather dry material in a fun and fairly informal manner. Furthermore, as an exercise leading up to the end of term it gave the students (and instructors) an idea of what areas of course content needed further attention. The “Art Theory Review Pie” focused on retention, material exam preparation and the practical application of course context in a relaxed classroom environment, but also challenged the students to move through the six levels of cognitive learning described by Benjamin Bloom.