Words on the Wadsworth: Podcasting and the Teaching of Art History

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Abstract

This course, *Words on the Wadsworth*, was the Humanities Honors course for the spring of 2009 at Hillyer College, the two year Associates degree program at the University of Hartford. Combining the content of a chronological survey of modern art with the new technology of podcasting and the venue of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford CT, the intent of the course was to create a challenging environment for the most successful students in our program. The practices of skill development, active learning, and connection with a community partner were integrated into the learning structure of the class. The case study addresses the ways in which the technology were integrated into the class, where students excelled and suggestions for other professors thinking of using similar technology. A sample podcast, made by student Larisa Woykovsky, has been included.

Keywords: Podcasting, experiential learning, course design.

> *"We don't do our best when we simply instruct. We do our best when we answer questions alongside the visitor, and ask questions alongside the visitor...We do our best when we offer multiple avenues of interpretation, and when we keep a lot of room for audience response."* Madeleine Grynsztejn (Samis, 5)

Hillyer College is a four semester, associate's degree college which operates as part of the larger University of Hartford. Many of our students begin in Hillyer because they have struggled as high school students; there is largely a disconnect between their grades and their SAT scores, reflecting clear deficiencies in basic academic skills and struggles with academic culture, time/resource management, and goal completion. Hillyer offers a structured general education program with small class size as a learning environment which will help students develop the critical skills they need to meet their ambitions. As part of a core liberal arts curriculum, art history is offered as an elective, along with other humanities offerings such as music, theater, and philosophy.

While the University of Hartford has an Honors program in other colleges, Hillyer's participation struggled against a culture which rigidly defines our students as remedial. Each year, students distinguished themselves in the courses we offered, earning high GPA scores and excelling in the academic environment, despite past history. Every year, some of these students transferred from Hillyer and, indeed, away from the University of Hart-

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ford. The Hillyer Honors program became a way to reach these students, challenge them intellectually, while also fostering necessary foundation skills, and retain them at the University. We identify these students early in their freshman fall, and offer a program of a freshman humanities class in the spring, a sophomore fall science or social science class, and one class taken for "contract" at the choice of the student and through direct collaboration with a professor. Students are also offered the opportunity to take an inter-disciplinary winter term class in Hawaii. The course offerings are proposed by the faculty, connecting with their teaching interests and expertise, and are chosen by committee in order to afford different professors this distinctive teaching opportunity. The program has been a tremendous success in engaging our students, increasing in participation every year as more of our students see the program as an interesting challenge beyond the mechanics of the general education degree.

The Course

Words on the Wadsworth was selected as the Hillyer Honors Course for spring 2009. From the beginning, we knew it would be ambitious in terms of content and projects; the rationale was to take students who were already at the top of the Hillyer program in terms of grade point average and challenge them beyond the standard curriculum. I pitched the class as a chance for students to become "tech-savvy art critics". In the classroom, we used a combination of lecture and discussion to learn the history of modern art. We used the Wadsworth Atheneum, located in nearby Hartford, CT, and its premiere collections of Hudson River School and modern European art as our site for exploration. Students were asked to develop a podcast applying their knowledge from the classroom to works in the Wadsworth Atheneum. The course philosophy and pedagogy aimed at the high goals of teaching art history of the modern period, enhancing students' reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills, introducing new technological skills, and engaging them with the critical community of scholarship in a way that breaks down the limiting cultures of "received" learning and boundaries of the classroom. As Chickering and Gamson have written in their work on principles for undergraduate education, "Expect more and you will get more" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The course was structured to cover the same material, vocabulary, and academic skills as the standard art history survey, ARB 112: Introduction to Western Art (modern). It was important to me that I change the content of the course as little as possible so that I felt these students got as solid an introduction to material as students taking the standard class in modern art. Both ARB 112 and *Words on the Wadsworth* were chronological surveys of art in the modern period (ca. 1850-present). Assignments were structured in both classes to test student comprehension of art historical concepts and key works through lecture discussions, tests and short papers. The research project, usually the standard culmination of a class as an application of skills in formal analysis and textual investigation, was still an exercise for students, though it took a non-traditional format.

As professors in the Hillyer College environment, we are often asked to be sensitive to the different learning styles our students bring to their studies; art history tends to attract learners who are primarily visual (Keefe & Jenkins, 2000). New technologies offer ways

to reach students who are stronger in aural and read/write areas of cognition (Buffington, 2000); indeed some scholars have argued that these students have significantly different expectations from technology in their classroom (Barone, 2003). The reading component was supplemented with an audio component in order to open a more engaging environment for critical listening. Audio technology, particularly podcasting, is becoming far more common as a result of technological advances and personal publishing. As museum education departments explore the use of audio technology to reach new audiences, including internally created podcasts of exhibit tours and interviews with curators and artists, and educators explore the use of podcasts as supplements to the classroom lecture, this is becoming an arena for creating a more active environment for the study of art. Over the semester, I chose podcasts from a number of sources—both student and curator casts from MOMA, SmArtHistory, and the Tate Modern, as well as several that I made for them directly. Listening to casts as part of the class was one way to introduce very specific material about works of art; we could choose individual works for more in-depth analysis. The second purpose was, however, to give students a range of styles to listen to in order to develop their own podcast style. By listening to different styles—informal, formal, single voice lecturing to a listener, two or more voices having a critical discussion and asking questions, designed for complete novices or for those with some background in art history—students could explore options for their own creations. Each listening assignment was also part of a writing assignment that asked students to explore two questions: what did they learn about the work and how did the podcast approach the material. Students thus developed critical approaches that were both aural and written as they examined both content and style.

It has been said in many ways that learning is not a spectator sport; the more we can ask students to experience art in a number of different arenas, the more we raise a community of engaged thinkers about the subject, able to relate it connectively to their lectures, readings, writing, and past experiences. The *Words on the Wadsworth* was shaped around a number of supplemental experiences. We attended a talk by contemporary artist Taiga Ermansons at Real Art Ways (Hartford, CT) and film-maker Rachelle Dermer screened her film, *Commit to the Line*, and talked with students as a way of exposing students to the artists' ideas of their own works. We visited an exhibition opening at the New Britain Museum of American Art (New Britain, CT) to see an exhibit on the Eight and to discuss the larger context of museum operations. We made two trips to our partner, the Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, CT); the trips were paired with unscheduled work time for students' projects. On the first trip we toured the galleries to gain greater understanding of the collections; on the second trip, we discussed the planning and execution of an exhibition and visited the conservation lab. These experiences were primarily for exposing students to a range of artistic venues, styles, and media, but it cannot be discounted that their secondary function was to increase contact between the students and myself and to increase their cohesiveness as a group.

The integration of a technology component into the *Words on the Wadsworth* class was the final element which made this course different from the standard art history class. Many studies have been done to assess the value of technology in the classroom, finding improvement in both basic and technical academic skills, a pedagogic tool for individual-

izing student learning, and increased student engagement in academic study (Means, Blando, Olson, Middleton, Morocco, Remz, & Zorfass, 1993; Reeves, 1998; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory 1999/2005; Center for Teaching History with Technology) I wanted to use technology under the umbrella of connectivist engagement (Siemens, 2006): more conscious of technology in the classroom because they are more familiar with it outside the classroom, students were challenged to learn to use podcasting as a way of stretching those boundaries of learning. "The course is not the container; teaching 'space' is not a physical place; personal does not mean 'in person'" (Barone, 2003). Students were assigned to create their own podcasts from art in the Wadsworth Atheneum. Since the University of Hartford is an institutional member, the Wadsworth Atheneum was already familiar with our students but Associate Museum Educator Charlene Shang Miller went above and beyond in her special tours for our students and embraced the project wholeheartedly. The objective was to create an outlet for their learning about art history, applying vocabulary and analytical skills and concentrated research on actual works in the museum context, all building on the critical listening and speaking skills they were developing in the classroom. The application of art historical analysis and research was central to the project assignment and my grading. The podcast project aimed at teaching a number of goals simultaneously: a practical outlet for their knowledge of art and art history, practice at writing and presenting an oral presentation, the technical skills of working with a microphone and digital recording and editing software, and critical thinking about questions of museum experiences, audience and connection between presenter and audience. I also hoped to instill in students with difficult academic backgrounds a desire to take ownership of their interests and knowledge as they created their presentations; it was a hope that the project, in its service-learning aspects, (Buffington, 2007) would develop into a way to dynamically reach other students and young people as part of the Wadsworth Atheneum's mission as a premiere cultural institution in the difficult urban demographic of Hartford. While this article addresses the academic experience of student podcasting, the benefits of podcasting in the museum setting are correspondingly numerous and rewarding: intensifying visitors' active learning, time spent with collections, and overall satisfaction (Smith & Tinio, 2008).

Audio Avenues for Teaching Art History

It is important to set this class in the context of responses to media that are part of the cultural landscape of my students in a way that was not part of my experience and education a generation earlier. Loïc Tallon and Kevin Walker have edited a new volume, *Digital technologies and the museum experience: Handheld guides and other media*, looking at the new ways in which the museum technology is changing. These technologies reflect a change in museum interpretation to move from the context of curators and educators as solely responsible for the teaching in the museum venue to the idea of visitor-driven, experiential communication with the material. (Bradbourne, x) These are a reflection indeed of a culture which is overall moving towards "personal relevance and interpretations, interactivity, and easy access and control of content" (Tallon, xiv); the increase in personal blogging, video casting from sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, file sharing of music, creation of learning communities in wikis, and the changes in television programming to reflect audience voting and 'reality' television are all part of a shift in media

experience. That these new technologies are changing the discipline of art history is clear in the new collection, *Teaching art history with new technologies: Reflections and case studies*, edited by Kelly Donahue-Wallace, Laetitia La Follette, and Andrea Pappas.

There are a number of new avenues for enhancing classroom teaching of art appreciation and art history from audio files. A number of American museums and galleries develop their own casts, notably the Metropolitan Museum of Art (http://www.metmuseum.org/podcast/index.asp) which uses the medium primarily for special exhibitions and reflections of its former and formative director Phillipe de Montebello, SFMOMA whose Artcasts includes both more "formal" presentations by artists and curators and a "Vox Pop" in which regular viewers to the museum talk about their response to works, and the Walker Gallery (Art on Call, http://newmedia.walkerart.org/aoc/about.wac) which uses the technology as cell phone accessible comments about works by artists and curators. An unusual model is the Museum of Modern Art (http://redstudio.moma.org/) which has hosted officially produced curator and artist podcasts and student podcasts, first those developed by communications arts students at Marymount Manhattan College and then expanding to include their Youth Advisory Council and an open call from the public at large. Major museums in Britain and across Europe have begun similar programs.

In the academic arena, professors have long been posting audio casts of their lectures, a number of which are available beyond internal course management systems in more widely accessible arenas such as ITunes U and Podcast Alley. An exciting and dynamic project is SmARThistory (http://smarthistory.org/), the work of art historians Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, which seeks to use podcasts developed as part of their teaching as the foundation for an art history web-book. This is a more structured integration of what has been an individual pedagogic approach but its open and accessible nature suggests that it will gain adherents from both teachers and students. It is a source which I have used in this course as part of the critical listening assignments for students because of its comfortable format, accessible technology, and reliable content.

In addition, one pedagogic tool for teaching art history is VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com/#home) which allows the pairing of group conversations and images. I could post a single image or a presentation of images; students would log-in and could add comments on those images either through typing in a comment field or by leaving a sound comment from a computer microphone or a phone. The image palette also allows commenters to draw on the image to highlight certain elements. Like a discussion board, the comments can be private (by invitation) or public, moderated or open. VoiceThread does offers a much more interactive feature for pairing the presentation of images and group discussion, especially attractive as a distance learning feature. For *Words on the Wadsworth*, I chose not to use this platform but was able to incorporate some lessons from its implementation elsewhere.

Assumptions about Technology

In preparing for the class, I realized that one of the things I needed to ascertain at the very beginning of the class was students' comfort level with technology. Because of a generational gap, professors sometimes perceive students as being very comfortable with technology without necessarily understanding the parameters of what that means or the distinctions of what specific technology the students felt comfortable using or even the differences between students' technology use (Bain, 51). In my own case, when I started teaching, digital cameras were not commonplace; as I was planning the course, it became clear that the technology was now standard, as part of their cell phones. At a college such as Hillyer which draws both affluent and needy students, and students whose educational experience may have significant gaps in preparation as well as students who were quite well prepared, this kind of specific knowledge is critical for running the course.

A short, anonymous survey asked students to rate their feelings about their own use of technology on a scale from 1 (actively fearful) to 10 (completely comfortable). I expected a range of answers, including some at the very low end of the scale. Fifteen students responded: four in the middle range from 5-7, three rated themselves at 8, and 8 at the upper range of 9-10. This self rating of their own comfort level is particularly interesting, in light of the technical problems incurred (discussion follows). Students were also asked to check off from a list the technology they had owned or had easy access to: almost all owned a cell phone with a built in digital camera and a digital camera, allowing for easy acquisition of images; 10 out of 15 owned an mp3 player, allowing for easy access to sound files. Conversely, only 3 of 15 reported having either a microphone or a digital recorder. Finally, in order to establish a baseline of technical familiarity, students were shown a list of ten processes, including common activities such as using a word processing program to very complicated sound editing, and asked to select any that they had performed. Downloading images and sound files appeared to be very common skills but while about 12 students had manipulated images using an editing program, only 4 out of 15 reported having altered a sound file using an editing program.

This survey made three major differences in how I taught the class: first, through a Provost's office grant, I bought four voice recorders for loan to students; secondly, I taught a full class on the basics of Audacity, shareware editing software chosen for its ease of use, functionality, and lack of cost, and thirdly, I built time into the syllabus when I would be available to help students with their projects. Materials posted on our web course management site, Blackboard, included a PowerPoint tutorial (http://audacity.sourceforge.net/Audacity_High_School.ppt) and links to technical tips for working with Audacity (http://www.guidesandtutorials.com/audacity-toolbars.html).
As the course ran, some technical problems arose. None of these were insurmountable problems but they did affect the overall semester activity. Students professed on the survey a greater comfort level with the technology than they actually exhibited. We had no designated technical assistance other than basic University support, which increased the students' reliance on me for technical expertise and greatly increased my administrative time. Students had difficulty converting from one file type to another; digital recorders often record in WMA format which only some editing programs can read and while mp3

is an industry format, mp4 is a standard output on the Apple system. Some students used alternative software, most commonly Apple's editing application, GarageBand, which also required separate assistance. Finally, on the assignment due date, we discovered distribution problems (file size of projects in anything other than mp3 format are often too large for e-mail filters).

While I needed to make technical changes quickly and responsively, some changes will only work in the next iteration of the class. The class on teaching technical material was at the beginning of the class, too soon in the semester; students were lured by the possibilities of podcasting but not yet attuned to what learning a new skill of sound editing would mean for their time allocation on the project. I also discovered that I cannot rely on them troubleshooting their own technical problems; fewer than half the class utilized the technical notes section on Blackboard, though one student reported doing his own search in both Google and YouTube to answer his own technical questions. Either distributing technical "crib-sheets" or creating internal working groups for technical information sharing might help these issues. Students should increase their familiarity with the technology earlier in the semester, perhaps through a mid-semester requirement of a recorded and electronically submitted short production accompanying the mid-term oral presentation. The software would seem less unfamiliar when it came time to record their final projects. These changes in the technical pace of the course and the methods for distributing information will strengthen the class overall.

Developing Presentation Skills

Active learning is something we try to encourage in a number of ways in our classrooms in order to create more direct engagement between students and the material. In the design of the course, I wanted to consider ways in which students could incorporate more oral and aural involvement; technology was clearly a focal point but it can also be an inhibitor for some students not comfortable with technology or a fall-back for students who are more comfortable with technology than the content of the class. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) suggest "simulating techniques that do not themselves require computers", using the example of "dry" laboratories for practice before expensive tools and materials are used. At midterm, *Words on the Wadsworth* students presented one work to the class; the presentations were designed to accomplish a number of critical goals. Students were encouraged to use this presentation to develop one part of their final presentation, thus breaking the final assignment into more manageable parts and accomodating Hillyer students' difficulties with time management. Professor Ellen Meinke, who teaches speech classes at Hillyer, gave a one class condensed presentation on effective techniques and communication guidelines. We specifically discussed the differences between presenting to an audience in person and presenting a recording to a listener. Students picked up tips for structuring a presentation and introducing evidence persuasively, as well as pitching their voices for interest and engagement. Student use of images as part of the classroom participation was used to simulate the audio experience in the museum. Students were confronted by the problems of how much information to include or exclude given that the audience were looking at the image, and how much information could be used to create comparisons, given that their final listening audience would not have the benefit of com-

parative images from a slide library so the students would have to create visual references with words, very familiar images, or through comparisons in the gallery itself. This could be a problem solved by using vodcasts (video podcasts) but at the cost of further technical problems and requirements (Lopez, Daneau, Merrill Rosoff, & Congdon, 2008). We also discussed at length the issues of speaking to a group where one can see the audience and respond to them as the talk continued and the difficulty of speaking to an audience who can only hear you. Techniques such as using a warm tone and extra energy, introducing oneself to the listener, using second voices (interviews, questions, quotations), and breaking up the presentation with music or other sounds to create aural interest in the podcast were all focused on as a way of being sensitive to the problems (and potentialities) of the medium. These skills are all ones that are transferable beyond the course itself.

Podcast Projects

The project guidelines were set as broadly as possible to allow for the maximum amount of student input. The tour was to focus on the collections of the Wadsworth Atheneum and to focus on the period styles covered in the class (after 1840). The tour should cover about 10-15 minutes of time and it was suggested that students cover around three works in detail. Beyond that, students were asked to develop their own theme, aiming for a thesis that was significantly more rigorous than "here are three works of art I liked in the Wadsworth Atheneum". Students were encouraged to use their tours as teaching tools, aimed at a hypothetical listener who was interested in art enough to download the podcast and go to the museum but who was not an expert in the field. Many of them pitched their podcasts to their classmates; this was ideal as a way of encouraging them to think of themselves as having something important to teach each other. Because the podcast was specifically to apply the art history they had learned in the semester course, students were encouraged to think of the podcast as an oral paper, requiring an introduction (both of themselves and the tour), a body organized into coherent sections with cogent evidence from both formal analysis and secondary sources, and a conclusion.

Several themes for the podcasts were concentrated examinations of single artists (Monet, Wyeth) or periods (Impressionism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, Synthetic Cubism, Surrealism). A few students examined more closely specific questions within a period (the influence of Japanese art on the movements of Aestheticism and Impressionism with a subtheme of images of women, class and gendered sexuality as themes of the American Impressionists). Many students adopted a very loose theme as a way of looking at broader questions of social culture (the relationship between artist and model, economic culture and its representation) or a genre of expression (three students used landscape as an organizing principle, choosing very different works for examples).

With all of the students, finding their own particular style was very difficult. Two students opted for no script at all because they wanted a level of spontaneity that they felt was inhibited by the use of the script; both podcasts had significant problems with presentation, evidence, and organization. A third student used an outline with some scripted material; this student used the script primarily because he used a second student from the

class to ask prompted questions. The technique was warmly received by his colleagues: "I liked how he brought in an additional voice and got his opinion on the paintings. F. did not seem to know a lot about the paintings and this was done to lead A. into talking about the paintings." The lack of formal script still created major problems in conveying critical details, however. Most students worked with a script and the resultant podcasts reflected the degree of rehearsal and familiarity; one student emphasized that while she worked from a script, she still recorded in segments to make the editing process easier. Some students used music as a personal accent. The techniques here ranged from a single clip used as a motif at introduction or conclusion or both, a single clip used as an intersession marker, several different clips used as intercession devices, or several segments of music played under the verbal track as a mood setting. Music was alluring, however; it leant an air of polish to presentations which students looked for, even when technical problems such as fading and volume level were distracting from the content track. Music also seemed to affect the attention students paid in listening to the podcasts as well, rating lower overall podcasts with more and better researched evidence than those with music but less good content.

Some students were very sensitive to the podcast as a tour, introducing the Wadsworth Atheneum as a place and walking the listener through the museum. One student used the walk time as an opportunity to discuss background on the artistic movement as a whole before beginning a new work's formal analysis. When students did not introduce themselves or their tour, the listeners felt lost and wanted that connection to the speaker. Students were sometimes frustrated by the changes at the museum which moved their works off display; in the interests of emphasizing the class content of art history and the podcast as a tool for teaching that content, students were told to treat the museum as a static display. We discussed, however, the ways in which podcasts, because of the self-publishing nature of their format, could be more responsive to these changes than the more formal, high-end productions of acoustic guides. The nature of the relationship between the classroom and the participating museum could have a tremendous effect on this problem; the more lead time students can build in to their preparations, the more the museum can inform students about impending display changes. There is tremendous potential in an academic museum, where advanced classes are often responsible for planning and designing an exhibition, for the technology of podcasting to open new educational directions both for students and visitors.

Good practice suggests prompt feedback is important (Chickering & Gamson, 1987); in this class, I tried to pair traditional feedback (comments on writing exercises, corrections on tests) with new technologies. After the midterm presentation, within 5 days of presenting, each student received an e-mail with extensive comments on the presentation, questions for direction of the final project, and a grade. In advance of the final project, students were given an extensive grading rubric for podcasts; having a sense of expectations and emphasis in the podcasts led to presentations which emphasized content (60% of the whole) over writing (included fully written scripts and less formal outline techniques; 25%), style (5%), and technical elements (10%). Similar to the midterm feedback as part of the grading of the final projects, students received extensive comments as well as grades. I felt my feedback in this class was extremely important to the class's success.

Moreover, the degree to which students participated in critiques was important in terms of developing critical listening skills both for new material and for their own production and editing and in terms of creating a community of learners sharing an experience around the material. At the midterm, students filed anonymous surveys rating and commenting on their colleagues' presentations; comments from these surveys were excerpted and added to the comments I sent to each student. As part of the final project, in lieu of a final exam on the content, we had a critique session, in the mode of studio art critiques. In preparation, each student was required to listen to every other student's presentation and to submit through Blackboard a short survey response. The survey asked students to rate the podcast on a five point scale from poor to exceptional, to choose the three strongest elements of the podcast from a list of characteristics (including elements like choice of images, research, formal analysis, and presentation elements such as clarity and music), to offer a few short sentences on what worked well and a few short sentences on what needed improvement. These anonymous surveys were then compiled so that each student received a report with all of his or her colleagues' responses. At the final critique, we listened to an excerpt from each podcast and the student was asked to discuss his or her goals, experiences, and to reflect somewhat on what he or she might have done differently. The rest of the students were asked to comment on what they had liked or not liked about the podcasts, connecting with their own experiences; it was a very fruitful discussion with some very critical and honest reflection on the end projects and the process ("I wanted an alternate voice that knew nothing about art"; "I should have spent more time on it"; "Going back to the museum for another visit didn't happen so I went on by doing more extensive research"). The technology of distributing the podcasts easily to all participants, the anonymous surveys as feedback, and e-mail responses from me were an essential combination to this idea of creating a committed and constructive environment for a productive critique session.

Art history provides a vital component in the liberal art curriculum, teaching students who live in a very visual culture to analyze works of art as primary artifacts reflective of cultural concerns and history. But just as our students are living in an age that is increasingly visual, they are experiencing academic learning and social interaction in ways which are increasingly less bounded by setting and schedule and increasingly marked by a broad range of technologies. Carl Rogers identified experiential learning as having three qualities: "personal involvement, self-initiated, evaluated by learner, and pervasive effects on learner." (Kearsley, n.d.). The *Words on the Wadsworth* podcasts were designed with this in mind: rather than top-down traditional use of the podcast as a lecture review (prof-casting), the student directly initiated the tour themes, thesis, choice of works and style. Student evaluation of their colleagues' work and self-evaluation in the final critique session clearly showed investment in the project. The lasting effects of new skills in writing, presenting, and technical knowledge of sound recording and editing are all important to students' academic development beyond the discipline of art history. Finally, the *Words on the Wadsworth* podcast projects created initial connections between students and the Wadsworth Atheneum, a reciprocal partnership with tremendous long-term potential for learning and community involvement, and connections between stu-

dents and a wider audience in a way which fosters a sense of ownership of academic ideas and a desire to share those ideas with others.

Acknowledgments

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