



Fiction, Literature, and Visual Art as Case Studies in Introductory Courses

Kelly Grenier
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/pedagogicon>



Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Grenier, Kelly, "Fiction, Literature, and Visual Art as Case Studies in Introductory Courses" (2023).
Pedagogicon Conference Proceedings. 1.
<https://encompass.eku.edu/pedagogicon/2022/try-it/1>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pedagogicon Conference Proceedings by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Author Biography

Kelly Grenier is a political science instructor and PhD student at the University of Kentucky. Extending her research on cultural censorship, she has observed that content presented through the arts is a powerful teaching tool, which may deepen respect for cultural diversity, encourage empathy, and animate civic engagement among students.

2022 Pedagogicon Proceedings

Fiction, Literature, and Visual Art as Case Studies in Introductory Courses

Kelly Grenier

University of Kentucky

This paper explores the usage of art in the college classroom to teach political theories and concepts. Rethinking how instructors can teach introductory political science courses to students socialized in a contentious political culture, this paper argues that art-based assignments in lieu of traditional case studies are well-suited to this challenge. Offering examples from an introductory political science course, this paper demonstrates the approach in action and offers suggestions to apply this approach in other disciplines and institutional settings.

Introduction

A recent report published by Heterodox Academy indicates that there is a growing reluctance among college students to discuss controversial topics in the classroom (Stikma, 2021). In the time between the prior survey and the current results of the study, the controversial topic that showed the greatest increase in students reluctant to give their views in a classroom was politics. Additionally, students were hesitant to discuss religion, sexual orientation, race, and gender. Thus, for instructors wishing to bring such discourse into the classroom, alternative modes of content presentation, engagement, and assessments may be needed to create the desired classroom environment. In this article, I describe and evaluate three assignments that replaced real world case studies with art. Asking students to choose pieces of art to analyze, within the confines of the assignment given, students explored the differences in democratic and autocratic governments, representation and protest, and political parties and ideology. It is well-documented that engaging with art has positive effects on cognitive development (Swanger, 1993). Additionally, the ambiguity of the arts allows for alternative interpretations, as well as multiple entry points and engagement at a given student's level. Thus, using art in lieu of case studies in some instances may not only surmount the challenges associated with discussing controversial topics, but offer its own benefits.

Institutional Context

Teaching an introductory political science course at a large research university in the south, the majority of the students in the class used to present this approach were not majoring in political science nor a related field. Instead, the students were in the course to fulfill a college mandated perspective and the vast majority were in their first year of college. This course was offered online and taught synchronously over Zoom. Details and submission links for all assignments were available at the beginning of each four-week unit on the learning management system. This particular course had 70 students enrolled. However, the approach explored in this article is not limited to this type of class or institution in its application; it can easily be employed in a different institutional context or in larger or smaller classes.

Overview of Approach

To assess the understanding of core concepts taught during the units, I asked students to explore the concepts under scrutiny through an analysis of literature, music, and visual art presenting those same themes. These particular media categories were chosen because they were what worked for the concepts I wanted the students to analyze. In this case that was operationalizing regimes, understanding minority representation, and the platforms of political parties. Other arts such as poetry, ballet, or sculpture could be analyzed instead if the instructor saw fit. At this point, I would like to emphasize that to employ this approach, the instructor does not need an advanced understanding of art and pop culture. Instead, students may analyze media they enjoy and interact with to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts through application in these assignments. While this approach was used in a political science course, it can be used with other disciplines particularly if case studies are already being employed to assist students in exploring and understanding concepts.

There are a multitude of benefits available to students when art is brought into the classroom. For example, a recent study has demonstrated that reading fiction heightened connectivity in the area of the brain associated with receptivity for language and imagination (Clark, 2013). Furthermore, fiction is able to assist William Perry's cognitive growth because there is ambiguity and room for alternative interpretations (Kloss, 1994). Thinking about the benefits of music, while the same lessons may have been learned through watching a documentary, music's positive effects on the brain are well-known and include assisting memory and mental alertness (Johns Hopkins). Similarly, through describing the piece

of art, thinking about what it represents, and discussing the piece in its context, students were able to activate their brains in different ways including embodied cognition (Arizona State University, 2017).

How does it work?

As a part of each formal assessment, I assigned a paper that was due in conjunction with the multiple-choice exam that tested the main outcomes of the unit. The paper that was assigned was expected to be between 720 and 880 words. While students were encouraged to read more on the topic, there was no source requirement. The idea behind assigning these two assessments in concert with each other is that such an essay would mimic an in-class essay but assigning it ahead of time would allow students to reflect on their ideas and study for the exam through writing on a closely related topic. When grading the essays, I primarily assessed the student's understanding of the concepts. Typically, students scored similar scores to the multiple-choice assessment. I will now explain the specific details of the three papers.

The first paper asked students to evaluate a literary/fictional government of their choosing using a measurement of democracy from a commonly cited database in the discipline. The measurement of democracy provided students with a source of authority on an abstract concept, but from class discussion, students began to see that the attempts to define the line between democracies and autocracies was muddled among databases. Through these discussions, learners were being exposed to the idea that other methods and viewpoints are valid if they have logic to support their assertions. Students not only enjoyed the assignment, but when assessed on determining if an example was democratic or autocratic, 96% of students answered correctly. This demonstrates that the assignment aided in their application of these concepts.

The second paper moved out of the world of fiction and into the world of political art to ask students to interpret the lyrics of a song criticizing a government. Students were asked to find a song that criticized any regime of any time period outside of their own. Students explored the lyrics that were often social commentaries through text analysis and uncovered themes of representation and governmental accountability. In analyzing verse written by others, the class found a way to open up a space to talk about minority rights, structural issues, and lived experiences. Many students chose songs from previously unknown to them singers and groups further increasing their exposure to new cultures. This knowledge was further supplemented when students shared their findings in class.

The final paper came near the end of the semester. At this point, students were more familiar with the main political concepts and theories of the course and it was time for them to apply what they had learned with fewer constraints. Thus, for the final paper, I asked students to find an example of a political cartoon from any country and any time period, research the political parties and ideology being represented, and explain the iconography and message that was portrayed by the artist. This required the students to recognize another stance beyond their own and that political parties do not follow along the same lines in all cultures. Discussing the papers with the students, the class agreed that this paper was the one that they learned the most by writing.

Discussion

Piloting this approach, I did not plan time for discussions into the course schedule, nor did I require students to present their papers to the class. Instead, discussions were limited to an organic conversation following the submissions of each paper. Continuing this approach, I would amend this to allow students the space to really explore the selected pieces of art and the key themes they articulated on paper with each other. Due to the large class size, allotting a larger period of time or even a session may be the most effective way to facilitate this conversation. However, in smaller classes, allowing students to present their essays would be another suitable way to continue the discussion.

While I have outlined this approach in a political science classroom, allowing students to analyze art to understand key concepts can be an approach employed by other disciplines particularly in the social sciences and the humanities. In this case, I assigned three essays, but there are many options available to instructors. For example, instructors could choose to have students submit a more robust term paper instead of a series of smaller papers or even require the class to analyze the same piece of art and discuss the different interpretations.

Reviewing the evaluations left at the end of the semester, students stated that they “loved” and “enjoyed” the assigned papers. Reflecting over the three assignments, perhaps the biggest benefit, in my opinion, was that students engaged with each other about their findings on all three assignments in our online classroom and left in their evaluations that they would have wished for more time to be spent on discussions. Given that this approach was motivated by a report that stated that college students do not enjoy discussing such topics in class, having a class that asked for more time to discuss their papers than what was allotted is remarkable and a strategy worth considering.

References

- Arizona University. (2017, May 27) *How looking at art can help your brain*. Arizona University. May 27 2017. <https://www.uagc.edu/blog/how-looking-at-art-can-help-your-brain>
- Clark, C.(2013, December 17) *A novel look at how stories may change the brain.*” Emory University. <http://esciencecommons.blogspot.com/2013/12/a-novel-look-at-how-stories-may-change.html>
- Kloss, R. J. (1994). A nudge is best: Helping students through the Perry scheme of intellectual development. *College Teaching*, 42(4), 151-158.
- Johns Hopkins. (No date).*Keep Your Brain Young with Music*. *Johns Hopkins Medicine*. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/keep-your-brain-young-with-music>
- Stiksma, M. (2020). Understanding the campus expression climate: Fall 2019. *Heterodox Academy*. https://issuu.com/heterodoxacademy/docs/ces_summative_research_report_2022_final?e=45498208/92727721
- Swanger, D. (1993). The arts, empathy, and Aristotle. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 27(1), 41-49.