

Title: Promoting Critical Thinking and Analysis in an Undergraduate-Level Course

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Summary:

An art history professor redesigns the assignments, rubrics, and lecture-format in an undergraduate course to promote critical thinking and deeper student engagement.

Background:

HA 362/562 Ceramics of Korea is an upper-level undergraduate art history course offered by the History of Art Department at the University of Kansas (KU). In this course, students develop visual analysis skills and critical vocabulary to discuss the material, style, and decoration techniques of Korean ceramics such as tea ceramics, celadon and blue-and-white porcelain in their East Asian cultural context. By studying and comparing different types of ceramics, students discover that ceramic traditions are an integral part of any society's culture, and are closely connected with other types of cultural products such as painting, sculpture, lacquer, and metalware. Additionally, students draw from theoretical works on ritual and society (Emile Durkheim), social capital (Pierre Bourdieu), "influence" (Michael Baxandall) and Edward Said's understanding of orientalism to discuss the function of ceramics in mundane and religious space and explore aspects such as patronage, gender, collecting, and connoisseurship within and outside Korea.

The ultimate goal of the class is to master methods of material object analysis that can be applied to any other visual and material culture field for a deeper, multi-disciplinary understanding of the history and culture of a society. Students examine for example how the availability of appropriate clay materials, knowledge of production/firing technologies, consumer needs and intercultural relations affected the production of different types of ceramics such as celadon ewers, bowls for the Japanese tea ceremony, and blue-and-white porcelain jars. A hands-on approach to the examination of ceramic objects in the collections of the Spencer Museum and an introductory tour in the art of pottery making at the KU Ceramics Studio complement classroom studies.

The course typically enrolls between 20-25 undergraduate and 2-3 graduate students. For the majority of the students this class is their first exposure to East Asian Studies and/or Art History. In order to help students understand the cultural context and the methodologies employed of this course, the instructor offers a tutorial in East Asian history and culture as well as in art-historical methodology prior to teaching the actual content of the course. Making the topic accessible to students is challenging and requires weekly lectures, since Korean ceramics is a rarely studied topic in the U.S. and therefore only a few (and rather basic) academic readings are available in English.

Major Course Objectives

1. Describe and explain the materials, designs and technologies involved in the production of Korean ceramics.
2. Identify, compare and contrast the meanings and functions of ceramics in varying sociocultural contexts informing their production and reception.
3. Apply theoretical frameworks from art history, cultural studies, anthropology, history, and sociology to the analysis of Korean ceramic traditions to develop a deeper, intercultural understanding of their production.
4. Create an oral report, in which you not only describe and explain the material and design of a specific object and identify its function but also evaluate recent historiographical and theoretical issues.

The course satisfies the KU Core Goal 4, Learning Outcome 2 (“ability to examine a variety of perspectives in the global community, distinguish their own cultural patterns, and respond flexibly to multiple worldviews”), and also corresponds to the required learning outcomes of 300- and 500-level courses of KU’s History of Art Department.

What does class look like?

The class meets twice a week for 90 minutes. During year 1, when the class was taught at KU, the class consisted mostly of lectures and short discussions of the readings, students’ analytical skills did not significantly improve over the course of the semester. Therefore, in year 2, when the class was taught at Harvard, I changed the format from lecture-based to discussion-based to allow students to practice their newly acquired skills and deepen their learning. While student performance was assessed via three take-home exams and one final presentation in year 1, a new set of assignments was implemented in year 2 that successfully increased students’ engagement with the readings and encouraged critical thinking, a crucial skill in the students’ professional and personal lives.

The current version of the class has two parts, in which discussion-based activities promote students’ self-directed learning. In the first part, the instructors guides a 50-60 minute discussion about a case-study and invites students to apply their knowledge gained from the readings to that case-study. Prompt questions (listed on the syllabus) include “in how far are tea culture and social class related in East Asian history?,” or “why did the Korean royal court switch from celadon to blue-and-white ceramics in the fifteenth century?” We spent the first 20-30 minutes of the case study discussion on finding answers to the prompt. If students struggle with the historical and cultural context, I provide some background information through short lectures. In the last 15-20 minutes of the case study discussion we look at one or two objects more closely to practice the crucial art-historical skill of comparative stylistic analysis. In the second part of the class (30-40 minutes), students meet in groups to discuss secondary source material with a specific question in mind that enhances critical reading skills (for example, “why does the author stress the Koreanness of the object?”).

A major change in this class is that I developed a series of theoretical readings to accompany basic introductory readings on the material. I implemented this change to offer students an

additional opportunity to practice their analytical skills by looking at the particular historical and cultural conditions for the production and the design of Korean ceramics from a broader perspective. Theoretical texts include those by Edward Said, Michael Baxandall, Emile Durkheim, and Pierre Bourdieu, which help students expand their perspectives of ways to look at ceramics. Students apply those theoretical models to a specific historical situation in Korean ceramics history. For example, they use Edward Said's orientalism theory to explain the "oriental orientalism" approach of early twentieth century Japanese collectors towards Korean ceramics.

Student feedback about the theory readings has been overwhelmingly positive. One student for example wrote that the "theory of influence ... has made me more careful when assigning credit to regions or countries or even a person for the things they produce." Another student wrote that the course was an "excellent combination of content on ceramic arts, history and cultural theories." Students particularly liked that they can apply the knowledge of theory to other courses and life.

Implementation:

In year 1, students did fairly well in the assignments, but their treatment of the subjects remained at a superficial level. Therefore, the redesign of the course in year 2 pertained to repeated practice & scaffolding in order to deepen students' discussions, broaden their skillset, and establish a connectedness of the material to life.

In the re-designed course, I provide students with a “terminology toolbox” (a database with approximately 100 specific terms and their definitions, for example “Oribe pottery,” “oxidation firing,” “pinpoints in glaze”) that is available online on the course website. Quizzes are conducted throughout the semester to check if students memorized these terms, since knowledge of the terminology is a prerequisite for understanding the readings and preparing high-quality oral presentations. Since the majority of students are not majors in Art History, I additionally created a five-page tutorial in Powerpoint that guides students through their first visual analysis of a ceramic object. I use this tutorial for in-class exercises and encourage students to use it in preparation for their oral presentations. The terminology toolbox and the tutorial pertain to course objectives no. 1 and 2.

To support students as they develop critical thinking skills (related to course objectives nos. 3 and 4), I created different types of assignments that function as scaffolding: the team reading, the think piece, and three presentations instead of just one oral presentation. I created four new rubrics and pursued an active communication with the students about the overall learning goals of this class.

- **TEAM READING:** The team reading tool helped students critically reflect upon the readings. Students analyzed the readings in the role of a “discussion director,” an “illuminator,” a “connector,” a “word watcher” and a “summarizer.” Students submitted their team reading notes one day prior to class. In class, each team met and discussed their findings. Over the course of the semester, students adopted different roles in their teams and thereby learned how to approach the readings from different angles. This continuous practice helped them be more critical of the readings and helped them prepare for better-quality presentations and research papers.
- **THINK PIECE:** The second new activity was the think piece. After each field trip, students wrote a one-page think piece about an object or an activity by referring to the readings and other class material, which not only enabled them to synthesize their knowledge about the object's historical and cultural background, but also helped them critically examine the ways in which “art” objects are presented in contemporary museums.
- **RUBRICS:** Newly created rubrics for each activity clarified my expectations to the students. I primarily used the “Rubric for Oral Presentation” to assess students' performance in this class.
- **ASSESSMENT:** Using the “Rubric for Oral Presentation”, I evaluated the students'

performance over the course of the semester. The actual assignment looked as follows:

Oral Presentation Assignment

1. Choose one object from the collection of the Spencer Museum. Meet with the instructor to receive approval for your choice. Visit the museum to examine the object in situ.
 2. Prepare an oral presentation, in which you
 - a) describe the form, color, glaze, decoration/firing techniques, meaning of decoration;
 - b) explain possible functions of the object;
 - c) contextualize the object within a broader East Asian framework (for example, if you analyze a Korean blue-and-white jar, consider a comparison with Chinese or Japanese blue-and-white porcelain);
 - d) critically examine the historiographical and/or theoretical framework currently used to examine such objects.
- **THREE ORAL PRESENTATIONS:** The complex assignment of a final presentation was broken into three segments: in their first oral presentation, students focused on the visual stylistic analysis of an object (see above, Oral Presentation Assignment section 1 and 2). In their second presentation, they were required to additionally discuss the context of the artwork (section 3). In their final presentation, students were also required to link the object with a theoretical framework discussed in class (section 4). After each presentation, I provided students with feedback, which helped them master each step before proceeding further. For each presentation, students were able to choose an object of their choice, which increased their motivation to prepare for their presentations.

Student Work:

Students' understanding of the course was assessed through participation in low-stakes weekly team readings, think pieces and three high-stakes oral presentations (the terminology quizzes were not graded and are therefore not considered in this portfolio). All three assignments evidence the students' sophistication of ideas and track the students' level of discourse. The fact that questions became more sophisticated and the terminology increased over time can be used as evidence that the intervention worked. Overall, students did a higher quality of work than in previous iterations of the course, particularly in their oral presentations.

Team Readings

Team reading is connected with scaffolding because it invites students to use the terminology and practice the application of theoretical models. The students' gradual improvement is not so obvious in the team reading sheet, but very clear in the oral presentations. It seems that the lowstakes practice of team reading helped with the high-stakes oral presentations.

A highly successful team reading note fully reflected the assigned role, displayed an excellent understanding of the readings and contained questions that would actively stimulate and sustain further discussion. In this strong example, the student critically reflected on the readings and crafted sophisticated questions about the material. The sample reflects the student's understanding of the Durkheimian model of ritual as a social practice, and connects this model with other examples from outside class (ritual in a protestant church) as well as examples from class (Korean ritual ware made from metal).

A less detailed team reading note only partially reflected the assigned role, only summarized basic information, contained questions that were too general, and did not link the readings to outside references and/or consider alternative perspectives. For example, the connector's role is to connect the content of the readings with other classes and/or the world outside of school. In this weak example of a team reading sheet, questions are not linked to the readings and are superficial. The student related the content of reading with his learning from other classes but does not provide any meaningful connections for class discussion, or to a specific type of ceramic object discussed in class.

Think Pieces

The goal of the second new activity, the think pieces, was to help students critically evaluate their experiences during our field trips. In year 2, I implemented two think piece assignments to help students critically reflect on field trip activities (i.e., trips to the museum and ceramics studio) and shared the rubric with the students.

As the chart below shows, students' critical engagement with field trip activities increased by two points over the course of the semester. A highly successful think piece not only provided a detailed description of a specific field trip activity but also critically analyzed the activity from different perspectives. A less successful think piece provided a cursory description of several

objects but did not provide a critical assessment of the objects.

Oral Presentations

Aside from the implementation of theoretical readings to encourage critical thinking, a major change in the re-designed course was the replacement of three written exams by three oral presentations. I think the scaffolding structure of these three presentations was the most successful change in the course. Compared with their first presentation, students did higher quality work in their second and third presentations - they used more appropriate terminology because they had practiced using them in their assignments and during class discussion. The scaffolding assignment also gave students the chance to improve their ability of critically selecting a suitable array of objects for comparative analysis. Prior to the last oral presentation, I offered an extra session in which students practiced the application (and critique) of theoretical models to ceramic objects. Better grades of their last oral presentation reveal that their critical thinking improved overall in this iteration of the class.

In a highly successful oral presentation, the student spoke clearly and confidently, made an excellent choice of primary objects, provided an excellent stylistic and contextual analysis of an artwork, and made a convincing argument by relating the object to a larger theoretical framework such as Bourdieu's theory of taste, etc. In a less successful oral presentation, the student frequently looked at notes, provided an unstructured visual analysis with a large number of examples inadequate for comparative analysis, and misunderstood the theoretical framework or the historiographical context.

In their first presentation, students were asked to "only" provide a visual comparative analysis of an object; half of the students succeeded in this task. However, the other half found it difficult to find good examples for a comparative analysis of their object, which is a basic art-historical skill. In two categories student work was evaluated on the C-level.

For their second presentation, students selected a better choice of comparative examples and made a more conscious choice of photographs for their Powerpoint presentation that enhanced their argument. They also provided a more sophisticated analysis of decoration methods. Student work reached the A-level and B-level and there were no more evaluations on the C-level.

This sample work shows that by the end of the semester, students were able to synthesize knowledge learnt in this class. They made a useful selection of objects for visual comparative analysis (in this case, a white jar with under glaze design in copper-red) and provided a contextual analysis of the piece (in this case the student discussed the development of the copper-red technique, and the meaning of the design motif). Furthermore, the student connected the object to a theory model (Bourdieu's cultural capital theory) to explain how white ceramics were used as objectified cultural capital in eighteenth century Korea. Students' presentation skills and visual analysis were all on the A-level, so in this case scaffolding worked. Their ability to conduct a contextual analysis also slightly improved, but the theoretical application stayed at the same, fairly high level (only As and Bs).

In previous iterations of the course, the majority of the students accomplished course objectives no. 1 and 2 but struggled with objectives 3 and 4. In the class taught in Spring 2016, students had much stronger results in the latter two course objectives: By the end of the course, students were not only able to describe and analyze an artwork using appropriate terminology, but they were also able to contextualize and theorize about ceramic pieces in a detailed manner.

Reflections:

The redesign improved the course in several ways. Having clear guidelines (= rubrics) helped students assess their progress as they worked towards the indicated goals. Scaffolding the oral presentations resulted in higher quality of student work. Breaking the final presentation into smaller units helped students accomplish all four course objectives.

Students appreciated the application of theoretical models to topics that they had been widely unfamiliar with, probably because the models made the material more accessible for students (especially for those who are not Humanities majors). Therefore, I plan to keep and perhaps even expand the number of theoretical models in future iterations of this class.

One change I will make for future versions of this course is the class structure. This year I began the class with case study discussions and mini-lectures followed by group discussions on the readings. However, I found that students would repeat points about the case study when discussing the readings. In order to avoid redundancy of the material, I will flip the order in the next iteration of this class– the discussion of the readings will be the warming-up exercise before students will approach the more challenging task of analyzing a specific case study, which requires students synthesize knowledge gained from lectures, readings, and previous class discussions.

I also realized that if I want undergraduate students to contextualize an object and/or apply challenging theoretical models to the cultural history of Korea, I need to prepare them better for this task by providing extra time to review the readings and examine theoretical models. I also realized that sample assignments are a useful learning resource for students. I consider doing a class activity in which students compare a successful sample with an unsuccessful sample think piece or team reading note.