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Rationales and Realities in Assigning Research Papers: Objectives, Prompts, and Scaffolding Panel

I Search...A Different Approach to Undergraduate Art History Writing, But It Works.

I’m going to tell you the story of a somewhat rocky road to the adoption and implementation of a very successful format for an art history paper; one that is ideal for undergrads, especially in any introductory course. My department uses it for our two required first year courses: Introduction to Visual Culture and Birth of the Modern and that’s about 200 students a semester.

It’s called an “I Search” paper. Some of you may be familiar with the term, but it was news to me and my faculty. I say rocky because the I Search format was a culture shift for the students and for the art historians. There is strong support for it now and many of us have customized it to fit different levels of courses, but initially it met with a fair amount of resistance. Ironically, we would never have considered the I Search format had we not been compelled to formally assess our students’ work on a departmental level.

I live in North Carolina now…at least since Oct. 9, but Otis is an art and design college in Los Angeles, and like every college in California, we deal with new accreditation and assessment criteria and mandatory competencies for written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy.

I know a lot of faculty hate that word ‘assessment’, but that’s what saved us, what moved us from the individual, subjective, and anecdotal assumptions about our students’ work to a documented, detailed overview of their demonstrated abilities in those key areas. We learned a lot from assessment and some of the results were surprising and that made us rethink our assignments.

First of all, the art historians weren’t worried about assessment. Our classes are small: 18-22 students, individual instructors, common syllabi, lots of opportunity for help. It was common knowledge in the Liberal Studies department that the art history classes were the most rigorous and the art historians required research papers beginning in the freshman year. We may have bordered on being smug about that.
We already had established a list of best practices. Research papers had to be drafted (actually counted as 15% of the total grade). This helped the students to scaffold the writing process and get formative feedback so they could revise the final drafts. We also encouraged faculty to have students peer review work in class.

We collaborated with the library staff and every art history class went to the library for three hours of individual guided help on their research topics.

We had a student learning center with writing tutors and a full-time art historian who spent six hours a week there as her service to the department just to help students with art history.

Students had weekly graded writing assignments to help them improve writing in general, grades were around a low B-/C+ average, and faculty complaints about student writing were usually about grammar and mechanics and generally focused on the English language learners because... we were sure we were doing everything right, so any writing problems had to be the students’ fault.

Collaboratively, we developed a common prompt for each semester. These are the prompts for the mandatory first year students: Introduction to Visual Culture and Modern Art

- Discuss the relevance and impact of the work of an artist/maker/designer in visual culture (make your choice from this list: http://www.otis.edu/life_otis/library/pathfinders/list_artists.html
- Explain what his/her intentions were in making the work, how the work functions in culture and how its representation influenced the mainstream response to understanding the work.
- Finally, explain how your research about the work has influenced your understanding of it.

Select one work of fine art or design made between 1850 and 1955 that you think best represents the ideas of the avant-garde when it was made and continues to have a significant influence on people today. In your paper you will take a position, find resources to support your position so you can explain and defend your position about the work.

We did a formal assessment of freshmen signature assignments; ours was the research paper.

What did we learn?
First, that most of the faculty did not use the grading rubrics they were supposed to, ones that were carefully developed to address the new requirements even though they were embedded in every syllabus. Since those were the same rubrics that we used to formally assess student work, there were considerable discrepancies between the departmental assessment and student grades and individual faculty assessment of student work—a very high inter-relator reliability factory in assessment speak. Faculty tended to grade for content; they wanted lots of information, lots of citations and that resulted in a lot of cutting and pasting and paraphrasing. Basically, we were teaching students to write reports.

Second, we learned that in terms of the written communication rubric—grammar and mechanics part—the majority of our students met or surpassed competency. That was a happy find. All that drafting and peer review had helped. Their writing was organized, competent in grammar and mechanics because that was an area of faculty focus. This held true even for the English language learners.

However, the students fell short in critical thinking and the art historians were appalled because this did not align with their perception of student work.

There was a lot of criticism about the prompts in relation to critical thinking competency. Comments like “This prompt really doesn’t align with what we are asking them to do for critical thinking” or “it’s not a bad prompt, but it forces the student to write a report and makes it easy to cut and paste information.” Or, the prompt is doing too much of the critical thinking for them.

Information literacy was dismal. The librarians threatened to cry and no one could understand why the students were using such poor sources when we were working with them in the library. Should mention that information literacy is an issue nationwide which is why so many colleges are addressing it so aggressively and it is closely linked with critical thinking skills.

Those results were the wakeup call. We took a collective deep breath and rethought our learning outcomes. We had to shift from what we wanted students to know which is hard to measure to what we wanted them to do in an art history paper, what they were capable of doing as freshmen with very little depth in the discipline beyond what they were assigned as reading and what they heard in class. And, we had to come up with a solution that negotiated the art historians’ insistence about content and the departmental concern about competency in those three core areas.

What we ultimately agreed to try was an I Search paper format. I’d like to take credit for the find, but it was the head of the library who researched our situation and discovered the I Search paper and the chair of the department who is a Lit
person but had read I about I Search papers in her field. We are old friends and have collaborated on a lot of interdisciplinary projects, but they brought new information and a fresh perspective. And it worked. We have used the I Search format for the past three years in all the first-year art history classes and, with customization in sophomore and upper division art history courses.

What is an I Search paper?

**Student-question driven** investigation of an issue/work/problem that they are interested in. It can be very broad; it can be very narrow and it can roam. I had students in a class on portraiture and female identity, who chose to write about fashion and corsets in the 17th century.

**Written in the first person**, includes the reason for the topic choice which can be personal, related to their major (this was the situation with my fashion majors in my portraiture class) or just curiosity. It always includes what the student knows or assumes about the topic, how that information was acquired (class, internet, ‘doesn’t everyone know this’?)

**Structured around a group of questions** that the student wants to find information about which can be different from ‘answers to’. Those questions operate like topic sentences. They can form a cohesive whole, but we had students whose questions changed dramatically as a result of what they found in a source and that was acceptable.

**A detailed explanation** of the research process in response to each question…by detailed, I mean that it starts with what search terms they used, where they looked, what they found, how they selected the source, what they read from that source, what they think about that new information in relation to their question.

**Key point**… the I Search paper does not have a thesis to be proven and that bothered some of the art historians who really wanted students to develop a thesis for their paper. However, that put us back in the same situation because the students didn’t have sufficient grounding in the discipline to formulate a thesis, but they were just fine asking questions. Additionally, most of the art historians were wary about taking even more class time to have students work on thesis development, on designing topics that would lead to more critical thinking, so the I Search paper began to emerge as the default format.

**Always concludes with a reflection** on what they have learned about the research process and how that information has influenced or changed their thinking or assumptions about their topic. Reflection is where students demonstrate metacognition.
The classic I Search paper stresses information literacy because it requires students to document their research process. That made the librarians happy, but not the art historians. It was a big rock in an already rocky road and some art historians were reluctant to adopt a format that sacrificed about 500 words of a 1500-word paper for a research narrative. However, we had those assessment results and it was apparent that the structure of the I Search paper aligned with our critical thinking and information literacy goals. What nudged the art historians to buy into the I Search was the opportunity it offered for students, even art history first year newbies, to investigate a question or assumption that was important or interesting to them, even if it didn’t fall into the traditional category of art history topics, even if they didn’t come to a definitive conclusion. It shifted the whole point of research and writing to “what do you want to know and why”?

I Search paper is about what they learned and thought about what they learned, rather than a paper in which they described and explained, or compared and contrasted, or supplied the general information on form, content, and context. Those are more conventional art history paper formats, but in our experience that format lent itself to being a report rather than a critical analysis at the introductory level.

Implementation

We provided a lot of support to both the faculty and the students the first year. We had discipline meetings with all the instructors about the assessment results, about learning outcomes, about the I Search paper, distributed research about it to the faculty and embedded short “how to” forms in the syllabi, and restructured the guided library research module.

To be honest, faculty bought into the I search paper in various degrees and that did effect the quality of the work the first semester. The strongest work came from faculty who supported the change. They took more time to explain the format in class, to assign home work that helped scaffold the paper, for example “what is one question, how did you search for that, what source did you find, what did you learn and what do you think about that”? That practice was enormously helpful to the students.

We discovered that all our students were highly skeptical about writing a ‘college paper’ or an ‘academic paper’ in first person. I taught the honors class and they were initially insulted because only writing in the third person was ‘serious’ writing. Many of us had some really productive class discussions about different kinds of writing, about purposeful and meaningful writing, about the value of critical questions, about reflection on what you have done and learned. I know that’s not about art history, but it encouraged the students to identify what issues
mattered to them about the course material, how they saw art history relating to their lives and majors, and that turned out to be far more effective than telling them how important art history was.

Once students got past the first person issue, they were very enthusiastic about the format because they felt empowered in the research and writing process and empowerment is one of the identified factors in I Search paper scholarship. Part of this we learned anecdotally, but the I Search paper was regularly and favorably mentioned in the course evals both semesters. Plus, our students write a formal reflection for each Liberal Studies Class and again, the I search paper was continually mentioned in relation to the art history courses. A lot of students reported that they took the course because they had to, but that doing the I Search paper had changed their mind about art history and about research.

Assessment

Yes, we did another assessment of first year work and there were improvements in all three competencies, stronger in the spring than in the fall which is what we expected. I think the most gratifying factor that we discovered was that not only did critical thinking competencies improve, they improved regardless of students being English language speakers or English language learners. Because the I Search format emphasizes student-driven questions and their critical reflections rather than the collection of information, English language learners could demonstrate stronger competency in critical thinking even when their written communication skills were uneven. This was not a surprise to the English faculty teaching developmental classes, but it did surprise our faculty who had English language learners in their art history classes. [This may not be an issue in North Carolina, but California has an extremely diverse student body, increasing numbers of Korean and Chinese nationals and often faculty have assumptions about students that are grounded on inaccurate information. This was a real eye-opener for our faculty and it ended up influencing pedagogy for some instructors. Changing how we ask students to write is aligned with what we ask them to do in class, what kinds of activities we’re designing and that encouraged faculty to design activities (panels, debates, presentations) where students had to take different sides, had to challenge each other’s assumptions.

Information literacy improved a little, but remains the weakest competency which is challenging with any paper that requires research regardless of its format. This is not just an Otis problem. According to librarians, this is a national issue. We worked with the head librarian to revise requirements for information. The library staff really focuses on having every student find at least one book on their topic/question during the guided research module. Remarkably, students are still amazed that books can be the only sources they need. We rethought requirements and standards for bibliographies and annotations and encouraged
faculty to stress fewer, but high quality sources for first year papers and encourage students to read sources more extensively rather than amass a lot of sources which they read peripherally. This has also been a stumbling point because we have some faculty who insist their students have a lot of sources, many more sources than the requirements for an A. I have no doubt their intentions are noble, but this ends up being counterproductive most of the time.

Pedagogically, most of the faculty now incorporate an I Search paper question into a couple of weekly homework assignments. More of them are taking class time for peer review which helps students exercise critical thinking. That kind of homework helps students scaffold the paper writing. It gives them a model for how to tackle questions and they get feedback on their questions, research process, sources, and their commentary. It definitely decreased ‘writing the paper the night before’ syndrome.

Competencies aside, I think that one of the unexpected advantages of the I Search format is that first year student papers stopped being so predictable, so formulaic, and so boring. They had much more interesting questions to ask, and were far more willing to read and write when they were in charge of the paper.

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