Developing a Collaborative Online Aesthetics Module

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1. Introduction

The aim of the project described in the title is the development, implementation and evaluation of a pilot project -- a short aesthetics module with an online element -- a collaborative venture between two higher education institutions in Southern Ireland. This activity was begun early in the Michaelmas Term 2000.

The project has a threefold purpose:

a) to consider sound pedagogical approaches to the teaching of aesthetics, including the fostering of independent learning;

b) to provide a richer learning environment for participants by adding a multi-media dimension to the module through the use of web courseware and,

c) developing collaborative learning between students and teachers at the two sites chosen, and within the two specific groups in their respective institutions.

2. Context

The respective institutions are Trinity College, Dublin, one of the seven Irish universities, and Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford, the largest of the fourteen higher education non-university institutes. The project is a collaboration between the Department of Philosophy, Trinity College & the Fine Art Department, WIT. The student groups involved are, in Trinity College, first year Philosophy Single Honours students, and second year Fine Art students in Waterford (WIT)

The course which is the subject of this paper is a short (one-term) undergraduate aesthetics module, exploring theories about the nature and purposes of art, and of the nature of aesthetic judgement, experience and interpretation. Within this it examines some important philosophical positions from Plato, through Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Marx to some important twentieth-century thinkers. A key objective therefore is that students will engage in philosophical argument as it relates to art. Although a course in philosophy, it utilises subject matter drawn from the visual arts, literature, music and drama, and it is helpful if students have some awareness of these arts. Assessment is by means of the standard term essay and yearly examination, and the teaching strategy is based on an identical one-hour lecture delivered to students at both sites, with additional online material delivered by Top Class courseware. The Trinity students also have the benefit of a standard weekly tutorial where aesthetic issues can be discussed. The Art students in Waterford have the option of obtaining single-subject certification on satisfactory completion of the module requirements under a scheme known as the Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects
Students in Trinity College do not have access to this certification since the universities do not subscribe to this scheme.

3. Rationale

Aesthetics is generally taught as a text-based subject within philosophy, but it is claimed by Parkinson (1988) that it is an area of philosophical discourse regarded by philosophers as 'dreary.' Parkinson presents an analogy with moral philosophy, citing Mary Warnock on the trivialising tendencies of moral philosophy in the Anglo-American linguistic tradition. However, she was also quoted as recognising a change of emphasis with the statement, *I think that the days of grading apples are over. Moral philosophy will be much more difficult... much more embarrassing to write than it has been recently* (ibid). Warnock was surely right -- no one can now deny that moral philosophy is a highly important subject since the relevance of concepts such as 'personhood' or the 'law of double effect' can clearly be shown. It has always seemed strange that in aesthetics, at least as it was traditionally taught, there was so little attempt to illustrate the issues or the areas commonly referred to in painting, sculpture, literature, drama, music, and this perhaps has contributed to the perception of 'dreariness'.

4. Methodology

The first aim then is the creation of a multi-media environment which can act as an enrichment of textual lecture material. For example, in the consideration of what constitutes a work of art students need to see examples of modern controversial and contested artworks such as Tracy Emin's bed, Carl Andre's bricks, some examples of 'ready-mades' or 'conceptual art' to demonstrate the importance of the concept of 'definitions' in art. In the exploration of ontological questions, it is useful to expose students to examples of early music to consider questions of 'authenticity', a recent topic of discussion, (and major selling point for musical recording companies), or to see examples of art forgery, such as the famous Van Megereen 'Vermeers' (Dutton, 1983) in order to evaluate the significance of the original art work. In questions relating to the role of mimesis or imitation in art, students benefit from seeing different representational examples in order to understand the psychological problems relating to representation, and to what Gombrich has called the 'myth of the innocent eye'. (Gombrich 1977) Even when discussing the nature of aesthetic experience itself we should expose students to what works might cause these experiences in order to illustrate notions of 'contemplation', 'disinterest' or the 'auratic' nature of the original work of art (Benjamin 1936). In talking about 'synaesthetic' experiences such as that described by Kandinsky in his description of the colour yellow, *like an ascending trumpet*, one needs to provide the example of such a 'phenomenal field' (Beardsley 1981 p. 37) before going on to discuss the nature of synaesthesia.

In subject terms the value to traditional philosophy students can be seen primarily in terms of relevance as a significant factor in the construction of meaning. So what is the value to Fine Art students? It is now widely acknowledged that arts practice will take place within an ever more accessible global environment, facilitated by developments in new technology. Therefore it is vital that students be encouraged to utilise developing telematic resources as a means towards new modes of creativity, but also as a learning resource. This course will encourage such interactive learning. Secondly, the findings of international art educational forums, such as the European League of Institutes of the Arts (ELIA), have recently placed great emphasis on inter and multi-disciplinary approaches to contemporary art education/practice, driven by current post-modern tendencies towards 'inter-textuality'. It is also vital that art practitioners are exposed to more theoretical perspectives arising from a variety of related 'arts' disciplines. Such theoretical perspectives may be encouraged by the following online discussion topic.

"Suppose you are an art curator who is offered for exhibition a piece of work which you think has no claim to being an artwork. What rationale would you give for its refusal?"

This requires students to consider the philosophical problems of definition, and to see why they are important for the artworld. Fine art, (and indeed philosophy) students frequently hold strong views on the democratisation of art, endorsing claims such as that made by the German artist Beuys, that *Every man is an artist,* but they need to see beyond this to the consequences of this claim for the artworld and for aesthetic appreciation of this claim.
There is nothing new to what is being attempted -- the use of slides and a tape recorder would also fulfil the illustrative function described above, but the intention was to provide this multi-media material online and asynchronously. The online courseware was therefore utilised both to provide the richer environment and to foster independent learning. Experience suggests that students like using the Internet, for example as a tool to source material; (in fact if anything they do this quite indiscriminately). **Top Class** was selected as the appropriate tool -- not because it may be the most user-friendly application -- it is claimed that it does not have the most intuitive interface, and it is expensive in terms of licences, but it was already in use in **Trinity College** in Dublin and the technological back-up to build a site was in existence.

So what can be done with **Top Class** that is pedagogically sound and will foster the independence we talk about? The US Behaviourist Gagne's **Sequence of Instructional Events** (Gagne 1992 p.201) indicates the processes that should take place in every learning event, and how this sequence relates to the learning process. This sequence is given here below, listing the teacher action and how this relates to the psychology of student learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gaining attention</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Informing the learner of lesson objectives</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stimulating recall of prior learning</td>
<td>Activation of prior knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Presenting stimuli with distinctive features</td>
<td>Attention</td>
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<td>5. Guiding learning</td>
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<td>6. Eliciting performance</td>
<td>Repetition</td>
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<td>7. Providing feedback</td>
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<td>8. Assessing performance</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Enhancing retention and transfer</td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
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It is claimed in this paper that the online activity described below can simulate this sequence of events, from its function in drawing attention to the stimuli being presented (nos. 1 & 4) through to its integrating role in enhancing retention and transfer (no.9).

For instance, in order to provide this integration, coherence and a clear mapping of all instructional activity, all material, including course aims and objectives, timetables, outlines, reading lists, can be accessed online, fulfilling the requirements of items 2, 5 and 9 of Gagne's list. Moreover, all inputs, from the standard lecture through to the online material are fully co-ordinated. Full lecture notes can be downloaded from the website. The online element does not replace standard lecture material but is supplementary to it. In the lectures students are presented with gapped notes in the form of Powerpoint slide notes so that students are guided (no.5) to identify key points, thus encouraging active listening, and a 'deep' approach to learning through the identification of concepts. (Boud 1988 p.33) The lecture is a tool aiding the construction of meaning, rather than the acquisition of information and within this lecture period questions are raised to encourage debate through whole and small group activity (nos. 5, 6, & 7), possible in this instance because of the small student numbers.

Students can access online a list of self-assessment questions (SAQ's) together with the answers. The intention is to engage the student, allowing them to check themselves whether they have understood the material, and to provide feedback to them in the form of correct responses (items nos. 6 & 7). **Top Class** also incorporates a scoring mechanism which can be accessed by the student, lecturer and programme manager. These scores do not make up part of the formative or summative assessment, which is still centred on the traditional academic essay and examination, but do provide continuous feedback which is non-threatening, and stimulates motivation through a positive affective response to the material. The theory of learning underpinning this whole exercise is Constructivist (Von Glaserfeld 1974 p. 7) with meaning as the key issue, and students being helped to construct their own meaning.
through the use of engagement, active learning, relevant material, discussion and problem-solving.

This online element, which could be seen by traditional academics as 'spoonfeeding', can usefully fulfil another pedagogical function -- that of providing 'scaffolding' which can be used to support student learning until such time as this is no longer needed and they have developed some independence. In *Trinity College*, the students are first-year Philosophy students, so are very much novices in terms of philosophical discourse and debate, and the art students in *WIT* have little knowledge of philosophy or indeed expertise in theorising. 'Scaffolding' is also provided in other online material, for example in the *Suggestions for Writing a Philosophy Essay*, whilst the self-test questions and answers are another form of scaffolding. This scaffolding is necessary, especially in the early part of the course where some perplexing philosophical questions are raised. Finally scaffolding is also provided in the computer conferencing that takes place, which extends the interactions occurring in the standard lecturing environment.

It is also possible to show how the online element goes beyond Gagne's Behaviourist approach demonstrated in his *Sequence of Instructional Events* (op. cit.), towards the utilisation of concepts based on Social Learning Theory (Squires, 1999 p.47). The Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1962) identifies a 'zone of proximal development' in which the learner is ready to make the next conceptual leap forward. He saw the role of the teacher as crucial in being aware of the stage that the student is at, and how she/he can be helped to make the next leap forward. Awareness of this 'proximality' and the fostering of teacher support can be encouraged through the online application with its extension of teacher-student communication and access to student scores for diagnostic purposes. For Vygotsky, this co-operation lies at the heart of all learning. The mediating role of the teacher can thus act to counter the problem of isolation and lack of human contact which has been seen as one of the disadvantages of open and distance learning (Knapper 1988 p.104).

Peer learning and group co-operation is increasingly recognised as an aid in the construction of meaning (Squires op. cit. P.49), but another of the disadvantages of computer-assisted learning is that it appears best tailored to the needs of the individual rather than the group (Knapper 1988 p. 103). However, in this project group discussion is promoted both through synchronous small group activity within the lecture period, and through the virtual seminars which are posted on the *Top Class* notice board, and in which students are encouraged to participate. It has also been claimed that this is a more democratic mode of discussion, dispensing with hierarchies and dominance (Knapper ibid p. 94). In order to increase the interactive element, photographs of individuals from each group of students are being posted on the site. Consideration is also given to rewarding students for this participation, given that some research with other interactive computer applications shows that some students are reluctant to participate in any online activity (Mason 2000).

The fostering of independent learning is of course the major rationale underlying the student use of online applications. It is claimed that in Ireland, certainly in the Institutes of Technology sector, there is 'over-teaching' -- the inheritance of earlier classroom-attendance-based pedagogies. However it is important to encourage students to think independently and web-based learning can foster both independence and responsibility for learning. For example in relation to the exploration of visual imagery, it is now possible through the use of the web for the student to gain almost instant access to any artistic image, as opposed to the trawling through books and exhibition catalogues that would have taken place in the past. Thus the Internet can act as a vast and immediate repository of resources -- a virtual gallery which can create exciting learning opportunities.

The optimum 'Conditions of Learning' -- a term adapted from that coined by Gagne (1985) have been categorised into those relating to the person, the processing of information and environmental conditions as follows:

*a person who has a positive self-concept, open mind and the necessary ability who prioritises the active and reflective processing of information which is patterned, meaningful, embedded and embodied in an environment which offers stimulus, support, feedback and reward* (Squires, 1994 p.16).

Whilst some of the factors relating to the person are beyond the control of a short Aesthetics module, it can be asserted that the method used is 'active' and encouraging of 'reflection'; under 'presentation of information' that the
material is patterned, meaningful, embedded and embodied in persons (both the lecturer and students), and under 'environment' that the material is stimulating, supportive, providing feedback, and hopefully reward.

5. Issues

Issues apart from the pedagogical and theoretical arising from this project are political and those of resource allocation and management. It is highly unusual in Ireland to have this type of collaboration at undergraduate level between two institutions, one a traditional university and faculty department, and the other a fairly new technological establishment. The project arose because one of the authors taught in both establishments and had access to student groups in both. However it is unclear whether this type of collaboration would be encouraged at management level, and whether it would lead to accusations of 'dumbing down' or novelty for its own sake. However one factor driving the technological application is an interest in both establishments, and in the academic community worldly in online learning, its development and effectiveness.

That said, the hugely time-consuming nature of materials development (Knapper 1988 p.104) should not be underestimated, including that of the sourcing of images, visual and auditory, plus the management of the two sites. The project is already behind schedule due to an under-estimation of completion times for different elements of the project. It is fortunate that TCD does have technical support and expertise in the building of Top Class sites, and to which the project had had access to this point. In WIT it was also fortunate that the project was able to call on the assistance of two enthusiastic multi-media and art lecturers. However the cost of licences is expensive, there is as yet in WIT no dedicated Technical Learning Support, and two sites have to be built, one in TCD and the other in WIT which will be identical apart from the photographs of their opposite student group. Licensing arrangements do not allow for one site to which both groups have access. Finally there are issues of training students in the use of Top Class and its conferencing facility which have yet to be addressed.

6. Evaluation

The other area still to be addressed is that of evaluation. The students as the primary customers of this learning product will be surveyed, both whilst the module is underway in this term, but also further down the line, before end of year examinations in May, when it is most likely that they will wish to access lecture notes and SAQs as an aid to revision. One key area of interest which is already emerging from use of the site to date by TCD students is what motivates some students to use the online material, but not others. In order to arrive at a view about the effectiveness of the online material, use will be made of the techniques suggested by Rowntree in his text Teaching through Self-Instruction (1990). In this way it is hoped to continually improve the content of the module.

Bibliography


**Notes**