CURRICULUM LAB: AN ARTS INTEGRATED APPROACH TO VISUAL AND INFORMATION LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017 I started Curriculum Lab, a workshop and exhibition series that takes an arts integrated approach to teaching visual and information literacy. Discarded library materials are used as prompts for hands-on, minds-on activities that, through art-making and discussion, encourage participants to take a deeper look at the relationships they have with words and images. With the majority of today’s information coming from visual and non-traditional sources, it’s important to develop creative new ways to communicate how to identify, evaluate, and effectively use that information, as well as being aware of bias and intent. This paper will briefly cover the main activities and talking points of the series thus far, hopefully initiating opportunities for further discussion, collaboration, and exploration. Due to the limitation of space, I will not be able to go into pedagogy, methodology, or outcomes at this time.

HISTORY

Curriculum Lab was initially conceived as a group art project based on library card pockets once glued on the inside of juvenile and young adult books in the School of Education’s Curriculum Lab collection, which contains publications from the 1930s through the 1970s. I selected 18 artists from a variety of backgrounds, utilizing various mediums, to join me in creating artwork out the cards, inspired by the text on each. The completed works were presented at Current Art Fair, exhibited at Studio Two Three, and sold to benefit the Richmond Performing Arts Alliance’s Early Literacy Learning through the Arts program.

In tandem with the exhibition, I created a series of workshops and community engagement opportunities to explore visual and information literacy through the arts. Over the last two years, I’ve done workshops with middle school, high school, and undergraduate students as well as art, library, and education professionals. Workshops can be done over the course of hours or days depending on the circumstance or intended outcome. They are created to be modular; able to be done with supplies as simple as a pencil and paper or as complicated as budget and space allow. In some instances, attendees have opportunities to screen print, paint, collage, and create 3D elements. You can see images and read additional information at http://jleerva.com/curriculumlab.

THE WORKSHOP

In order to lead the workshop, the instructor needs paper, art supplies, a projector or screen for a PowerPoint presentation, and Wi-Fi for students to use during the last quarter of the class. I use four main activities, each section beginning with a prompt which initiates an activity followed by a discussion. Each activity builds on the next, focusing on topics like critical thinking, problem-based inquiry, awareness of personal biases, and research/discovery techniques. At the end of each workshop, there is an opportunity to fill out an anonymous evaluation form and outcomes are collected with permission. These evaluations and outcomes are later analyzed to improve future instruction while staying aware of in-class trends.
1: The Horse in the Camel Suit

Students are asked to draw an image based on the title, relying only on their knowledge and memory. They cannot look at reference material or the internet for help and are encouraged to focus just on getting their ideas sketched out on paper, not to make a “perfect” piece of art. This is meant to be a warm up activity, getting students into a creative mode while thinking visually about text and introducing the basic concepts of the workshop. Discuss outcomes. How and why did they make the choices they did? What obstacles did they have to overcome? What would have made the process more successful? Discuss visualization, conflation, and The Treachery of Images, which includes the paintings of Magritte, Photoshop manipulation, and repurposing images as propaganda.

2: Who Do You Think You Are?

Students are paired up, ideally with someone they don’t know. Only asking the question “Who do you think you are?”, they must discover things about one another. They can ask the question as many times as they like, but can’t add any other words or context. The question serves as a thesis and the first person interview is the source. Each student must then create a conceptual portrait which presents not a direct likeness but the details revealed during the interview. In some instances, students may be asked to do portraits of both themselves and their partner, then compare and contrast. Talk about the research process, context, and sources before moving into a discussion about what is revealed in visual information. I often use political portraiture like David’s Napoleon Crossing the Alps to explain how to research and deconstruct images.

3: White Ghost/Goast Summer/Simmer

The title on this card has been edited and obscured. Students are asked to speculate, drawing what they think the title is referring to. Once drawings are complete, talk about why students drew what they drew. What assumptions did they make and why? Now, invite them to pull out their phones or computers. Together, look up the title to see what’s actually being described, then have the students draw what is actually being referred to. How different are the results? How does this exercise relate to how we consume images and information? Discuss fact checking, personal biases, and information access, as well as how the research process can be used in not just academic pursuits but creative endeavors.

4: Artist Challenge

Now that everyone has completed the main activities and engaged in a variety of discussions, have students pick a fourth activity card of their own so they can apply all they’ve learned and seen. Just like the artists in the exhibition, students create artwork out the cards inspired by the text on each.

CONCLUSION

A second phase is currently being developed for 2019-21. I’m looking for opportunities to start dialogs, lead workshops, exhibit work, make new work, and collect data. If interested, I can be reached at jleerva@gmail.com or leeba6@vcu.edu. Workshops are currently being planned for the Fall semester at Roanoke College and the University of Richmond.