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Drawing, Painting, and Sculpting as Methods of Teaching and Studying Art History

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Abstract

Traditional teaching methods in art history – lecture and seminar – favored teacher-centered and text-based approaches. Their status as the main instructional practices was stabilized in the 19th century following the ideals of “the old paradigm of art history,” focusing on objective and neutral research of old masterpieces in their original, historical contexts. Since the paradigmatic changes within the discipline in the late 20th century, art historians have begun to question the sufficiency of lectures and seminars to meet the multiple approaches of contemporary art history. This article discusses drawing, painting, and sculpting as methods of teaching art history. Twenty-five students at a Finnish vocational college for culture studies participated in the research and produced data by writing about their study experiences. The data was analyzed using content analysis and discourse analysis. The results of the study show students experienced visual study methods as motivating and efficient, developing their knowledge of art history, as well as skills in operating with it.

Keywords: Art History, Teaching Method, Drawing, Painting, Sculpting

Introduction

Art history is not only an academic discipline taught at universities but also a subject taught at various other levels of education. Even though art history is taught widely, the methods used in teaching it have rarely been studied, which Kelly Donahue-Wallace and her colleagues see as a regrettable shortcoming (Donahue-Wallace, La Follette, & Pappas, 2008). James Elkins (2008) claims that lectures and seminars have traditionally had such a dominant role in terms of art history instruction at universities that university teachers of art history have only recently begun to develop other kinds of instructional approaches. Donahue-Wallace et al. (2008), for their part, argue that the focus of art historical research has been on historical objects at the expense of other research topics, including the pedagogy of art history.

The paradigm of art history has changed drastically during the past few decades. Art history is no longer regarded as mere history of Western art in terms of exact and objective classification of past masterpieces, as well as their observation in their historical contexts, but rather as visual culture studies interested in past and present objects including non-European visual culture, as well as the processes of creating and experiencing them (Kraynak, 2007; Pooke & Newall, 2008). Audiences and their experiences are being included in art historical research, since artists are no longer considered to have the exclusive right to determine the meaning of their works. Audiences participate in art processes and actively construct meanings of artworks, contributing to the conception of art history as a dialogue between the spectator and the artist, as well as between the present and the past (Kraynak, 2007, Pooke & Newall, 2008). Art history is no longer regarded as a mere rational domain, but emotions, affects, and sensory experiences have also been introduced as approaches to art historical

research (Kraynak, 2007). Bearing these paradigmatic changes in mind, it is understandable that art historians have begun to yearn for alternative approaches in teaching art history. However, a recurrent notion in the literature on the pedagogy of art history is that teacher-centered lectures still dominate the pedagogy of art history (Herrmann, 2005).

Recent paradigmatic changes within art history – described as pictorial turn, emotional turn, and sensory turn (Mitchell, 2005; Lauwrens, 2011) – have called for an art history that is more closely anchored to the visual qualities of works of art and to experiencing them. Furthermore, recent research on art history pedagogy (Sienkewich 2016) suggest more student-centered teaching methods based on active learning. Inspired by the aforementioned guidelines, this article discusses drawing, painting, and sculpting as methods of teaching art history. Twenty-five students at a Finnish vocational college for culture studies participated in a one-year-long art history course, studying it using picture-based methods and reflecting on their study experiences in writing. I begin the article by defining the research methodology and continue by a literature review mapping the historical and contemporary practices of teaching art history. This is followed by data-analysis focusing on analyzing students' study experiences generated by picture-based teaching methods. Finally, the results of the analysis are discussed in the frame of contemporary art history.

Methodology

The empirical data of this research consists of written reflections in which twenty-five students majoring in Visual Expression at a vocational collage in Finland wrote about their study experiences while studying art history by drawing, painting, and sculpting. After each visual assignment, students were asked to write about their study experiences, as well as their opinions on the appropriateness of the assignment in terms of studying art history. Finally, students were asked to make suggestions on how to improve the teaching methods of the art history course. Pedagogically, these reflections were aimed at promoting students' active role in studying art history, as well as developing their metacognitive skills. In this sense, the research had qualities of both autoethnography in terms of self-exploration (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and action research in terms of developing more appropriate instructional practices (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

This study applied qualitative research methods, since it was interested in the nuances of students' experiences generated by visual teaching methods based on learning-by-doing (Bogdan & Biklen 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2000). In order to get insight into the variety of students' learning experiences, the data was first classified by content analysis (Cohen & Manion, 1995; Krippendorff 2004). In the next phase, the findings of the content analysis were analyzed using discourse analysis, in order to contextualize and discuss them in the frame of contemporary art history (Fairclough, 1992; Silverman, 2000).

In this research, I had two roles – those of a researcher and a teacher – which is challenging in terms of reliability. The problems of a teacher-as-researcher have been discussed widely (Craig, 2009; Kincheloe, 2006). In addition to pedagogic sensitivity, it requires skills of critical self-reflection, as well as an explorative approach to one's occupation (Kincheloe, 2006). In order to control my own biases as a researcher, I collected data on several occasions during the research period and analyzed them inductively using data triangulation, challenging the findings of the previous data-analyses. Furthermore, I wrote a research diary, making careful notes about my observations and experiences. Nevertheless, the results of the analyses inevitably include my voice as a researcher. Thus, the results of this research are contextual interpretations of the topic, as is typical of qualitative research (Krippendorff, 2004).

Literature Review

Lectures, seminars, and excursions have traditionally been the main teaching methods of art history (Donahue-Wallace et al., 2008; Stöppel, 2010). The origins of formal instruction in art history can be traced back to the lectures held in Italian art academies in the 16th century (Witcombe, 2008). Because the research objects of art history were visual, their mere verbal description was not considered sufficient; visual representations were needed. At first, lectures were elucidated with prints and drawings depicting original paintings, sculptures, and buildings, or with casts of original statues. In the 19th century, the use of photographic images as illustrations of art historical lectures increased. (Witcombe, 2008) A significant improvement in terms of visualization of art history lectures occurred in the second half of the 19th century, when slides of photographic images were introduced; slides could be projected onto a screen, which enabled all lecture participants simultaneously to see the picture of the object being discussed (Nelson, 2000; Witcombe, 2008).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) – the professor of art history at the Universities of Berlin and München – was one of the first lecturers who used two slide projectors simultaneously, so that two images could be seen side by side on the screen. This instructional practice introduced a new comparative method in which works of art could be studied in relation to each other, paying attention to their similarities and differences (Nelson, 2000; Witcombe, 2008). Wölfflin's comparative method was regarded as an efficient means of teaching art history, and it has held its position as the main form of art historical slide lecture until the present times (Nelson, 2000; Witcombe, 2008). In contemporary "slide-lectures," digital images have replaced analog images. Digital images and technologies provide art historians with new possibilities for photo editing, as well as versatile ways of contextualizing works of art, and provide students with possibilities of exploring works of art outside formal teaching (Donahue-Wallace et al., 2008).

Seminars have traditionally been another important teaching method in art history. Seminars are based on interaction between teacher and students, and they embody the epistemology of the discipline, emphasizing critical reflection, interpretation, and understanding (Paletchek, 2000). As an academic teaching method, seminars were introduced in the natural sciences at the University of Halle, in Germany, in 1812. From there, they spread to other universities and disciplines, including art history. The ideas of the 18th century Enlightenment, such as emphasis on explorative learning, strengthened the status of seminars. (Paletchek, 2000; Stöppel, 2010) In seminar-based teaching and studying, students normally prepared and presented papers that were critically discussed with teacher and peers in the spirit of Socratic dialogue. This was regarded as developing students' skills in knowledge construction, critical reflection, and scientific research. (Philgren, 2008)

Fritz Burger (1877-1916) acted as a professor at the University of München, Germany, at the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1910 and 1914, he organized art historical practicums in which students practiced drawing, painting, and sculpting, in addition to more theoretical seminars. The aim of these practicums was not to develop students' visual skills, but rather to generate deeper understanding of the creative process of the artist through students' own experiences of making pictures (Hauck, 2005).

Already the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Socrates had recognized the value of travel in terms of learning, but the historical roots of excursions can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when upper-class men completed their studies by traveling to significant historical sites (Krepel & DuVall, 1981). The popularity of excursions increased in the 18th and 19th century, when they became known as "Grand Tours," on which noblemen familiarized themselves with the cultures and sights of European countries, especially in Italy

(Brodsky-Porges, 1981; Chaney, 2003). Edward Brodsky-Porges (1981) emphasizes that the reasons for Grand Tours in the 18th and 19th century were primarily social and educational. "

Inspired by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who emphasized the role of direct observation, as well as collaborative and experiential learning, Karl Volkmar Stoy (1815-1885) included excursions in the academic curriculum at the University of Jena, in Germany, at the beginning of the 19th century (Krepel & DuVall, 1981; Lössner, 2010). When art history stabilized its status as an academic discipline in Germany in the 1840s, excursions were introduced as a central method of teaching art history, since they enabled students to visit original architectural sites, as well as to observe works of art in their original contexts. This was regarded as a valuable means for students to identify themselves with history (Preziosi, 2009; Stöppel, 2010). After the establishment of European art museums as public institutions in the 18th and 19th centuries, their collections became important destinations for art historical excursions (Donald, 1991). In contemporary times, digital applications provide students with possibilities to make virtual excursions to museums and architectonic sites all over the world (Kohle, 2013). Despite many benefits, these virtual excursions lack the immediacy of sensory experiences that are typical of traditional excursions.

Teaching methods are often divided into teacher-centered and student-centered approaches. In teacher-centered methods, teachers typically distribute information to students, whereas students' active construction of knowledge and collaboration with peers characterizes student-centered methods (Garrett, 2008). Among traditional teaching methods in art history, the slide lecture can be regarded as a teacher-centered teaching method, whereas seminars and excursions are, per se, more student-centered teaching methods.

In recent art historical literature, new approaches to teaching art history have begun to emerge in terms of more student-centered and collaborative ways of learning. Many of them seem to be inspired by the discipline-based art education (Dobbs, 2004; Erickson, 2004) and multi-cultural art education (Blocker, 2004; Sabol, 2000) in which art history is understood as a valuable cultural framework, providing students with opportunities to understand and appreciate not only the art and cultures of different times and places, but also themselves and other people (Chanda, 2007). Furthermore, they emphasize skills of visual literacy, including skills in both interpreting visual messages and producing them purposefully (Blocker, 2004). Consequently, various approaches of active learning (Coorey, 2016) have been developed in which students are more directly involved in the learning process, for example, comparing contemporary and past societies and their arts (Rose, 2016), studying works of art through verbal and visual means (Allison, 2009), or discussing everyday objects from an art historical perspective (Rose, 2012). Through these approaches, it is hoped that students find connections between art history and their own life-worlds. Based on recent research literature, multimodal and collaborative teaching methods motivate students to study art history and activate them to integrate their life-world experiences to the study of art history (Allison, 2009; Rose 2012, 2016; Sienkewic 2016). In addition, new technical implementations, such as digital images, computer-based interactive methods and social media, have gained attention in the pedagogical literature associated with art history (Finch, 2015; Donahue-Wallace et al., 2008). It has been noticed that digital environments provide students with novel possibilities of active learning and motivate them to study art history (Finch, 2015; Harris & Zucher, 2016; Schrader, 2007).

This research discusses drawing, painting, and sculpting as methods of teaching art history. They follow the principles of learning-by-doing based on constructivist and experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Phillips, 2000). In addition to cognitive and mental processes, emotional and sensory processes are also included in the constructivist framework in this research. These methods and learning theories are in unison with the

practical orientation of the curriculum of the Vocational Qualification in Visual Expression, emphasizing the skills of applying art history in interpreting and producing visual messages and positioning one's own visual works in the continuum of art history (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2014). Following the example of Fritz Burger's art historical practicum (Hauck, 2005), students' own experiences of making pictures are assumed to develop their skills in interpreting works of art, as well as in expressing themselves visually.

Even though the participants of this research were students majoring in visual expression, the skills in drawing, painting and sculpting are not essential in this method. More importantly, drawing, painting, and sculpting are understood as means of visual thinking, providing an alternative to the mere verbal processing of art historical topics (Mitchell 2005; Stafford, 2008). Furthermore, their aim is to generate deeper understanding of the creative process of the artist through students' own experiences of making pictures (Hauck, 2005).

Learning tasks for making pictures were applied in a number of ways during art history studies. Some assignments directed students to explore the styles of different periods, as well as the characteristics of various cultures, visually. Students also observed and compared past and present cultures and societies by modernizing old works of art. In addition, they made contemporary ritual masks, applying the concept of ancient objects to contents that reflected students' own thoughts and experiences of the contemporary world. Visual products, including the ideas behind them and the experiences generated by making them, were presented in class and discussed collaboratively. In these assignments, making pictures was regarded as a mode of visual exploration of art historical topics, whereas visual products were understood as the visual outcomes of learning processes that demonstrated acquired knowledge, skills, and competence.

Findings

In order to include the students' voices in this research, the findings will be elucidated by a selection of students' comments describing their experiences generated by visual assignments. The data revealed that students experienced visual assignments in two ways: on one hand, they regarded visual assignments as visual explorations of art history and, on the other hand, they regarded drawing, painting and sculpting as forms of visual thinking fostering their involvement in art history.

Drawing, Painting, and Sculpting as Explorations of Art History

Without exception, the students were of the opinion that visual assignments had increased their knowledge of art history, by which they meant their knowledge of past and present cultures, works of arts, art historical styles, artists, techniques, materials, and ways of expression. Visual assignments contributed to the conception that art history is not only knowledge about art history, but also skills in applying art historical knowledge.

“Art history is not only knowledge of past events and art historical styles. The interpretation of works of art is important as well (...) trying to figure out what they tell about their times, people, and cultures.” (student 14)

Awareness of times and their changes, as well as time-related changes in art, was regarded as an important element of art history. Visual assignments were experienced to develop skills in exploring works of art from different perspectives. Assignments in which works of art from different periods of time were compared with each other, or in which old paintings were modernized, activated students to closely read works of art and interpret their

visual messages. Visual tasks based on comparing the present with the past activated students to explore past and present cultures and societies, as well as their own attitudes towards them.

“I think making pictures helped me to understand how times have changed and to observe the changes that have occurred in art. When modernizing the painting, I paid careful attention to it and its style and expression. (...) I learned to view works of art from the perspective of their times.” (student 16)

Students were of the opinion that visual messages in the pictures and their ways of expression, as well as the materials, techniques, and tools used in creating works of art, were relevant in terms of both art history and visual expression. Art history opened a historical perspective to the materials and techniques, providing students with a means to understand them more deeply, as well as to apply them in their own works more consciously.

“My opinion is that visual assignments are a very good way of learning. (...) I like such tasks because, through them, I can develop my skills in making pictures and learning about art history.” (student 4)

The majority of the students described drawing, painting, and sculpting as “reflecting on,” “exploring,” or “becoming familiar with” art and art history. These word choices reveal that students did not regard making pictures as “mere” drawing, painting, or sculpting, but as a meaningful way of studying art history.

“Making a witch drum was an essential part of the learning process. I got a better insight in the traditions and art of the culture of Sami people in the north of Finland. When I made my own witch drum, I learned in greater detail about the cultural and visual traditions of witch drums.” (student 19)

The pedagogical aim when making pictures was to take account of the students’ own thoughts and experiences of different works of art, and to integrate them into the study of art history. However, the assignments created an eagerness to study the backgrounds of the artworks, and generated self-motivated interest in reading art historical literature.

“Making pictures as a method of studying is much better than reading books or writing essays. When making pictures, I concentrated more closely on the subject – and noticed that I need some more background knowledge. So I started reading ... this time reading was motivating, because I needed the information in order to finish my painting.” (student 21)

In spite of the overall positive reactions toward visual assignments, a couple of students questioned their contribution to studying art history. They experienced drawing, painting, and sculpting as fun and deviating from text-based teaching methods – but did not regard their contribution to studying art history as significant.

“My opinion is that these assignments are nice. You can learn art history through them and they were fun. (...) But I don’t understand what they have to do with art historical knowledge. (...) However, I learned to take influences from past and present works of art into my painting.” (student 8)

Drawing, Painting, and Sculpting as Forms of Visual Thinking

Students experienced that visual assignments deepened their understanding of art historical topics. A number of the students felt that making pictures helped them to structure the topic in question, as well as to make a difference between relevant and irrelevant matters.

Visual processing of art historical themes was considered to be an efficient, meaningful, and motivating method of studying art history.

“I learned much about the Celtic culture through making pictures. When drawing the symbols and ornaments, as well as creatures of mythology, I had to observe and study them carefully and draw them time after time in order to practice their style. I think I learned much more by observing visual objects from Celtic culture and drawing them than only by reading about them.” (student 23)

In the data, there were numerous comments in which making pictures was regarded as a more efficient, intimate, and concrete method of learning than verbal methods. Drawing, painting, and sculpting were experienced as rewarding methods of teaching and studying art history, because students could use their own creativity and imagination and integrate them into the study of art history. This was considered to be highly inspiring, which may partly be due to the fact that participants in this research were students of a studio-arts-based degree program in Visual Expression.

“These were the best assignments during the whole year. (...) The freedom encouraged you to use your imagination and make your own decisions. My motivation lasted till the end. I think I learned much more by drawing than by only listening to lectures.” (student 23)

Visual assignments combined concrete procedures of making pictures with abstract thinking, which seemed to enrich students' conceptions of art history. Drawing exercises in which students imitated visual objects and patterns of foreign visual cultures helped them understand the subject better. Thus, visual methods of learning-by-doing emerged as processes of understanding-by-doing.

“I wasn't familiar with Polynesian tattoos before. But when I drew their patterns time after time, I realized that – in fact – the patterns were quite simple, but were entwined in a highly complex manner.” (student 11)

What initially might appear to students to be mere copying of artworks and other objects of visual culture, was later experienced as learning through the guidance of artworks. Some of the students described their experiences of studying works of art through making pictures as so intimate that the original works of art seemed not only to direct, but even to determine, their visual processing. Works of art seemed to tell their stories through their visual expression, and to steer the study process.

“It is interesting to go inside the painting and let it live its own life. (...) A painting can tell many stories.” (student 15)

“In the exercise on Finnish art, my thoughts evolved as the work proceeded. It was fun to search for new pictures to be attached to my work; one picture led to another effortlessly.” (student 10)

Making pictures emerged as a multi-layered activity in which conscious and unconscious levels of knowing and experiencing merged. Several students experienced making pictures as a way of identifying themselves with the artist's creative process, or with the era and culture of the work of art. This resembled the projection of emotions that is typical of an esthetic experience.

“When I made my sculpture, I began to think about how these kinds of sculptures were made in the culture I was studying – and I understood how demanding sculpting must

have been with those prehistoric tools. My appreciation of the culture increased tremendously.” (student 12)

It was not only the artists of past times and foreign cultures that students seemed to identify themselves with – they also seemed to gain a new kind of self-knowledge when studying art history through drawing, painting, and sculpting. The students thought that art history can guide an individual person to see themselves and the world from a new perspective, revealing layers of the self previously unknown. They experienced that art history increased not only knowledge of art history and the surrounding world, but also self-knowledge.

“Studying art history can develop your identity because analyzing art increases your self-knowledge. Somehow, you can apply the knowledge of picture analysis to observing your own life. (...) This may help you notice the reasons and consequences of your behavior.” (student 12)

Discussion

Students experienced learning a number of things when studying art history through visual assignments, such as art historical knowledge in general, skills in analyzing and interpreting works of art, skills in visual expression, use of creativity, and metacognitive skills. Visual assignments seemed to increase reflection on art historical topics. The knowledge and skills constructed through picture-based assignments did not emerge as propositional and static, but rather as interpretative, performative, and dynamic, corresponding to the epistemological conceptions of constructivism (Gergen, 1995; Phillips, 2000).

The data revealed that students understood objects of visual cultures as visual messages when they interpreted them and commented on them by making pictures. Drawing, painting, and sculpting clearly revealed to students the dual contexts of art history: those of creating works of art and those of interpreting them (Bal & Bryson, 1998). In the process of studying works of art, these two contexts were put into a dialogue, both enriching and challenging each other, developing skills in critical thinking. John Tosh (2008) regards this type of reciprocal observation of the present and the past as thinking with history. Through the practices of comparative observation, students learned to position both the original works of art and their own visual creations on the continuum of art history, which is regarded as a central precondition for the development of critical visual literacy (Mitchell, 2008).

Students experienced visual assignments as developing their skills in visual literacy. This experience corresponds to the conception that the visual, embodied, and haptic experiences connected with making pictures can enrich visual perception beyond the language-bound functions of identification and categorization (Arnheim, 1974; Mitchell, 2008). Additionally, students felt that visual assignments enabled them to both express and internalize contents whose mere verbal explication was challenging. It is not possible to express all aspects of a visual experience verbally (Arnheim, 1974). However, the data of this research supports the conception that the visual processing of such experiences can be profound (see Stafford, 2008).

Studying art history through visual means generated a host of positive experiences that resemble flow-experiences in terms of deep involvement and concentration, self-generated motivation, and joy (Czikzentmihalyi, 2014). In addition, making pictures, as well as presenting and discussing them collaboratively, seemed positively to contribute to the development of an open and constructive atmosphere in the class. Observing works of art, studying them through visual means, and discussing them collaboratively integrated students'

life-world experiences, as well as the emotional reactions generated in study situations, to the study of art history. It is because of these qualities that the students experienced drawing, painting, and sculpting as efficient and meaningful means of studying art history.

Students underwent a host of emotional experiences when studying art history through visual means. When making pictures inspired by objects from past times and other visual cultures, students identified themselves with past artists and foreign cultures and learned to appreciate them. Furthermore, they learned to use their own life-world experiences as a resource in interpreting art, which increased their self-knowledge. Mary Erickson (1995) regards this kind of creative, fact-based imagination and emotional identification as a central constituent of art historical understanding.

Conclusion

This research shows that the visual teaching methods applied in this teaching experiment placed students at the core of art history studies. It was their perceptions, interpretations, thoughts, experiences, and visual creations that formed the basis for studying art history. This student-centered, picture-based approach of active learning motivated students to steer their own learning processes, whose study outcome was not only an increased knowledge of art history, but also the students' increased knowledge of themselves. It seemed that the students were involved in their art history studies holistically and could approach art historical topics from a number of perspectives corresponding to the current approaches in art history.

The purpose of this study is not to argue that visual approaches in teaching and studying art history would suffice alone. Nor does it claim that they are equally applicable at all levels of education. However, visual teaching methods may furnish studies of art history with qualities beyond reach through mere verbal and text-based instructional practices. This research encourages teachers to apply these and other picture-based methods in teaching art history, since they might inspire and motivate students to familiarize themselves with past and present visual cultures and societies, as well as to explore their own relationship with them.

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