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Small Groups in Large Classes

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The fact that "mass lecture" is almost synonymous with "mass class" in academic circles suggests that the only thing an instructor can do with large classes is talk to (or at) them. After some desultory attempts at general discussions, question and answer sessions, and optional discussions for interested students, that is exactly what I settled into in "Introduction to Art," a class in art appreciation which I teach to roughly two hundred students every semester. I clarified and refined my lectures. I distributed mimeographed sheets bearing artists' names and dates and the main points of each lecture. I showed slides of paintings and talked about them.

After my first experience of team-teaching with colleagues from other departments, I felt lucky to be talking about visual art, because it was obviously easier to retain student interest in objects of discussion that were visibly before them than to lecture on theories or stories or histories that were absent and unread. On the other hand, a class in which the lights are out most of the time has more than its share of sleepers.

What I disliked about the large classes was the passivity and literalness of the students, their desire for precise answers to questions for which there are no precise answers, their tendency to busy themselves recording every word I uttered rather than really looking at the paintings,

the poor quality of their interpretive essays, and the resentment that was inspired by exams. I came to believe that the speaker/listener dispenser/receiver structure of the lecture format, exaggerated in a mass class situation with no discussion or separate discussion sections, bred fear and hostility toward *doing* anything. It took me longer to realize that some of my expectations were unrealistic and that my own aims and methods were at odds.

I wanted to develop interpretive competence and confidence, which is far more important in an art appreciation class than the memorization of data, and I tested for interpretive competence. However, in class, I provided the students with no practice in interpreting; in taking exams, students were confronted with an unfamiliar activity and a sink-or-swim situation. Some, of course, were able to use my interpretive commentary as a model and apply the methods I had discussed and demonstrated to unfamiliar visual examples, but easily 50 percent of the students were unable to do so.

What follows is a sampling of the sorts of exercises and discussion questions which I incorporated into the mass lecture format in order to align my methods with my goals. Some are designed to counteract "spoon-feeding," to encourage students to look and think for themselves, before they hear what I have to say about a certain artistic style or example; others demonstrate principles or phenomena which have been presented theoretically in a preceding lecture; others provide practice in visual recognition and interpretation; and most of them—to the extent that they are carried out in small groups of three to five students—promote the articulation of opinions about art and exchange of ideas.

1. After a lecture on the contextual preconditions of visual communication and the difficulty of deciphering works which are culturally remote, students are asked to form groups to discuss and answer the following questions about a Fifteenth Century painting of the Annunciation.
 - a. What event is depicted in the foreground of the painting?

- b. What is the relationship of the three figures in the background to the figures in the foreground?
- c. What does the bird with the halo represent?

After 10 to 15 minutes, I collect the answers and read as various a selection as I can find in a few minutes. This serves to illustrate the point of the previous lecture and leads into a discussion of iconography.

- 2. For the purpose of emphasizing the difference between what a work of art represents and what it expresses, student groups are asked to discuss and list the differences between two Fifteenth Century Annunciations, one of which was discussed in an earlier class. After 15 minutes, I gather the papers and review some of the differences they might have noted, relating them to the overall expressive and iconographic content of the paintings.
- 3. After a brief period of looking at *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth and reading the following statements, students are asked to indicate—by a show of hands—which are interpretive statements.
 - a. The colors in this painting are low in saturation.
 - b. In this painting, a female figure with her face turned away from the viewer is shown in a rural setting.
 - c. This is a picture about the beauty of nature.
 - d. There are three principal "objects" or "figures" in this painting and one primary division in the surrounding "field" or environment.
 - e. The painting expresses loneliness.

I go on to say more about descriptive and interpretive statements, how description supports interpretation, and what may make one interpretive statement more accurate or better than another.

- 4. I allow students about ten minutes to isolate the interpretive kernel in three brief critical statements on *The Scream* by Edward Munch, a painting which they have each interpreted. This serves to reinforce earlier exercises on making and supporting interpretive claims and also illustrates that what they have

been doing conforms to common critical practice.

5. After discussing the concept of style, but before discussing Impressionism, student groups are shown about 80 Impressionist paintings (on automatic timer) and asked to characterize the style in terms of subject matter, treatment of subject matter, formal characteristics, and media and techniques.

For the most part, such exercises seem to serve their purposes. However, in the first semester that I made an effort to use them consistently, a faculty member sitting in on the course described group discussions and activities as the weakest part of the course, because some students were non-participants or passive or refused to take the groups seriously. My own opinion was that most students did participate, enjoyed the participation, and learned something from it. The activity of most students made the passive minority highly visible.

During the second semester, I refined many of the exercises and clarified ambiguous questions. I collected all class exercises and used them to spot-check attendance. I instituted a new grading policy, awarding "extra-credit" points for some group and individual exercises. All students or groups handing in an assignment received an attendance check, but one or two points were awarded only for adequate or superior answers to questions. Attendance was excellent, class morale high, and the interpretive essays on exams were much better. I believe that the single most important factor in the students' improvements from first to second semester was my decision to collect and grade in-class assignments. I have no shame about using the grade to force students to do what I know to be good for them.

One of the things I enjoy most about this method of teaching is planning and inventing exercises and sequences of exercises which enable students to come to realizations about art which are not automatically processed as information. One of the things that I do not enjoy is the amount of time it takes to read and record the assignments. In many ways, it's easier to lecture!