

# Situating art history for meaningful learning

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## **Purpose:**

Examine college students' attitudes towards art history and art history courses and a possible change of attitudes after the instructor's attempt to situate learning.

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## Initial Concerns – Background of the problem:

- In art education courses we stressed issues such as
  - Multiculturalism
  - Interdisciplinary learning,
  - Critical thinking,
  - Problem solving, etc.

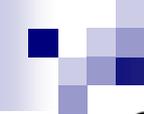
Vs

- Art History courses based on
  - lectures, memorizing information, moving chronologically from one art period of the western world to the other.

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As a result

- Students (undergraduate non art majors) were skeptical about registering in an art history elective course (memorizing “useless” information was considered a “waste of time”).
- Education students that “have to” learn.  
(registered to fulfill elective credit requirements or to follow their advisors’ suggestion).



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## **Hypothesis:**

An attempt to situate knowledge of art history would cause positive change in students' attitudes, regarding specifically the factor of usefulness of the material.

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## Method – Situated learning approach:

A socio-constructivist method of teaching and learning, which emphasizes the importance of considering the needs, interests and learning styles of **specific individuals** as well as the natural and social **context** in the education process.

Contemporary applications mainly in preschool environments.

Do high school or college students lose their ability to negotiate meaning?

Or do teachers give up on making learning meaningful to older students for the sake of detailed pre-planning of courses, which would be meaningful to supervisors or ministries of education?

How can an area such as art history, which by definition refers to the past, be made meaningful, for example, to a specific group of college students today?

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## Participants:

37 females from program of Preschool Education of the School of Education at the University of Nicosia that enrolled in an introductory elective art history course.

23 third-year and 14 fourth-year students, average age 21, average GPA 2.7

Passing free time with friends, music, movies, on the computer.

Museum and gallery visits only when required in order to fulfill a class assignment.

Enrolled in the specific art history course because they needed electives or because their advisor suggested it.

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## Tools:

Students completed a questionnaire.

1<sup>st</sup> part: 26 questions (Likert scale), statements about:

Art history / The art history course.

Positively / Negatively worded.

Items indented to examine attitudinal items related to how interesting, useful and clear they considered art history.

2<sup>nd</sup> part: information related to their interests, working load, reasons for enrolling in the specific course and other demographic information.

The 1<sup>st</sup> part of the questionnaire was also distributed at the end of the semester for comparing and identifying possible student attitude change towards art history after the instructor's attempt to situate learning.

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Analysis of the students' responses at the beginning of the semester showed high disagreement with the following statements:

q10: Art history is related to preschool education ( $\bar{x}=3.11$ ).

q12: Issues and concepts from art history have applications in contemporary life ( $\bar{x}=3.11$ ).

q19: I will benefit from the art history course ( $\bar{x}=3.08$ ).

And high agreement in the following:

q26: I have enrolled in the art history course because my friends have ( $\bar{x}=1.38$ ).

q11: Art history is chaotic ( $\bar{x}=2.41$ ).

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## The process - Premises of Situated Learning:

### 1. Learning is grounded in the actions of everyday situations.

E.g. The study of Ancient Greek art was initiated by:

Photographing buildings in the campus area, identifying neoclassical buildings with references in ancient Greek monuments.

And an imaginary walk in the classroom with a mummy as a guide initiated the study of Ancient Egyptian art.



## 2. Knowledge is acquired situationally and transferred to other similar situations.

Connecting the course material with topics from other courses and with everyday situations.

E.g. Carnival period, students expressed interest in costumes in general.

Further analysis of Ancient Greek art with Dora dressed up as Medusa led to the study of other contemporary issues related to fashion and jewelry making, in connection with the Ancient Greek culture as expressed in art (e.g. Minoan and Cycladic wall paintings and frescoes).



- Reference to the purpose and function of masks in different cultures and time periods (Ancient Greek drama, Chinese festivals, traditional Japanese theater, African and Native American rituals, contemporary theater performances, carnivals, sports, army etc.).
- Individual creation of masks.
- Description in relation to the knowledge they had acquired.
- Group improvisations and performance.



### **3. Learning is the result of a social process that encompasses ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge.**

The main learning process was socioconstructivist project work, which included:

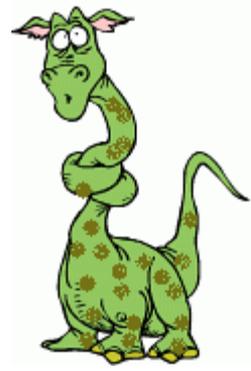
- Interactive activities that develop a deeper understanding by offering multiple perspectives of a phenomenon(a) over an undetermined period of time (Fosnot, 1996).
- Posing questions and using inquiry methods in small groups to seek answers.
- Constructive conflicts between students to help them heighten the logic of their final solutions to problems and negotiate knowledge.

# E.g. Which elements of an art work should be minimized and in what degree in order for the art work to be considered Minimal?

Story of a Wizard who turned his pets minimal in order to teach them a lesson after they took something that did not belong to them.

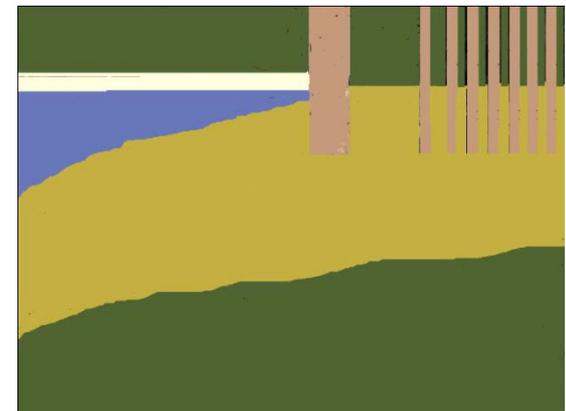
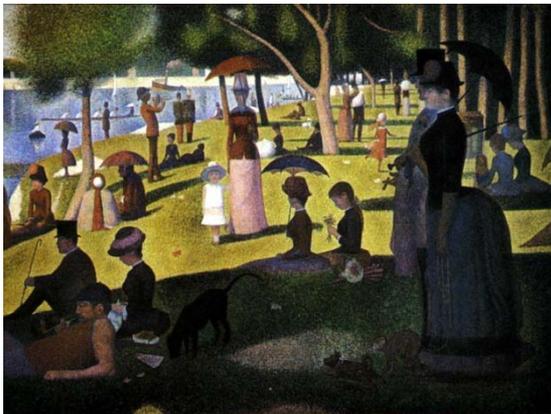


Ambra katambra,  
every selfish dragon  
is a social criminal  
and shall become  
totally MINIMAL!



In order to find answers to the question, the students:

- Studied notes and additional related literature.
- Individually created minimalistic art works, presented, explained, compared them and disagreed on what and in what degree should be minimized in minimalistic art works.
- Studied a post-impressionist art work and transformed it into a minimalistic work.
- Presented their work, had discussions, and drew conclusions.



- 4. Learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of actors, actions, and situations.**

The epistemology behind this study held that:

Knowledge is gradually constructed by individuals becoming each other's students, by taking a reflective stance toward each other's constructs, and by honoring the power of each other's initial perspective for negotiating a better understanding of subject matter.

This theory of knowledge leads to practices described by Gardner (1999) as:

Education that is based on helping students study their ways of making meaning and their negotiations with each other in a context of symbolization and communication.

Components that define negotiated learning (Forman & Fyfe, 1998) :

**Design** refers to any activity in which students make records of their plans or intended solutions to problems.

**Discourse** connotes a deep desire to study and understand each other, confront constructively, experience conflict and seek footing in a constant shift of perspectives.

**Documentation** refers to any activity that renders recording of the performance with detail, to help others understand the behavior and the reasons behind it.

Storytelling by the students was mainly a mean of documenting the results of the process of negotiating knowledge since the students were seeking original and entertaining ways of presenting the results of their project work.

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## Results - Attitude change towards art history:

### Students who “choose” to learn

t-tests - significant differences in the attitudes of the students from the beginning to the end of the semester. The students expressed positive attitude change in the majority of questions (17/26,  $\alpha < 0.01$ ).

The largest differences in the responses from the pretest to the posttest administration were related to their negative feelings derived from:

The idea of memorizing information in art history courses.

The difficulty level of art history courses.

The complexity level of art history

The idea that most students acquire knowledge on art history which they forget after the end of the course.

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## Concluding concerns and challenges:

The lack of standardized measures of art history knowledge makes it difficult to assess and compare various forms of instruction that take under consideration specific individuals in specific contexts.

Relatively homogeneous group of participants in the study. How easy would situating knowledge be if:

- The instructor had never met the students prior their enrollment in his/her class?
- The students had never met each other and came from different fields of study, with different nationalities, age and socioeconomic level?

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“If we intend to reduce or relinquish the use of 'transmission approaches to teaching' (such as art history lectures or other forms of teacher-dominated talk about art) in favour of interactive and open-ended approaches, then we will find ourselves devoting more time to teaching less content" (Korosick, 1996, p.17).

What part of art history will we chose to ignore?

What should be emphasized is the development of students that would be informed and sophisticated decision makers, especially at the college level, in order to be self-motivated learners who would want to learn the new and understand the old and the role of the teacher can be that of the guide for the meaning-making and decision-making process.



Thank you

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