

## WRITING AS A WAY OF TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO TALK “ART TALK”

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Since my course RLGS 2576 (“Art, Thought, and Spirituality”) was converted into the current format, I sought to redesign those facets of the original instructional plan that could be utilized effectively to promote the broader strategies of the writing program.

The course by intent is broadly conceptual and intellectually challenging, and is aimed at not only fostering a more sophisticated, philosophical understanding of the meaning of art works, but of teaching students how to speak self-confidently the language of art itself, or what is sometimes called “art talk.” According to the syllabus, the course examines “the close and complex relationship between esthetic expression and private religiosity, or ‘spirituality.’ The word ‘spirituality’ refers to the varieties and patterns of personal religious experience as opposed to the beliefs, institutional structures, and ritual practices of organized religion.” It also investigates “how theories as well as personal accounts of artistic creativity, experience, and appreciation can both broaden and deepen our understanding of the inner life that is otherwise communicated in religious terms and how artistic expression can also have a quasi-religious or “spiritual” character... The central objective will be to illumine the way in which the construction of the individual self and the formation of the personal identity are intimately tied to different quests that are *artistic* and *spiritual* at the same time.”

The course objectives themselves elaborate these general goals. The course objectives are as follows:

- Enabling students to grasp what is actually involved in the production of an art work, or art form, as well as the relationship between the act of creation and the experience of art.
- Comprehending the nature of creativity itself in the development of thought along with the appropriate philosophical and conceptual models that have been used to make sense of the process.

- Exploring at length the meaning of the term “spirituality” as a unique dimension of art.
- Understanding why the “artistic and the “spiritual” cannot be divorced from each other. .

Clearly, this sort of pedagogical undertaking requires a rigorous disciplining of the student’s capacity for the sort of abstract, specialized, and modestly technical language that dominates formal esthetics, avant-garde art statements and manifestoes, and poetry criticism (among other genres). Success in such a venture from my standpoint as an interdisciplinary scholar, who has built an academic career around communicating the wide-ranging “global” significance of postmodern religious thought and philosophy, demands familiarizing students with, and empowering them to speak as “fluently” as possible, such an argot itself. The form of the earlier writing assignments were retained because my experience in teaching the initial course version twice convinced me that they worked very well. As the cliché runs, “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it.” The general parameters of these assignments are explained below.

But in order to retrofit them for a “reinvented” course with the added practical task of *teaching writing*, I made significant modifications that emphasized a deliberate process of self-study and self-critique involving *re-writing* with both the aim and hope that students would at the same time discover how the crafting of sentences and the refinement of thought itself are inseparable. Since the kind of “thought” this courses pushes cannot be captured in the quotidian, “give me the facts, mam” sorts of discourse that students are not only most acquainted and comfortable with, but are often advanced even in an academic setting as the “norm” for verbal expression, a new approach to both in-class and out-of-class writing exercises became vital.

In the “pre-conversion” course context these assignments were structured for the most part to force students to grapple with content issues. But it gradually became apparent – especially after some bad experiences with students in the second go-round who seemed both to lack the capacity for abstract thought and resented having to engage with it – that the interconnection between the comprehension of content and the type of discipline-specific writing the course necessitates had to be seamless.

The most significant example of this “core conversion” procedure can be found in what I did with the journaling requirement for the course, which was always crucial. Originally the journal was merely a device through which I as an instructor could keep tabs on the degree to which the students were doing the weekly readings and understanding the lecture material. It also served as an instrument of feedback and assessment of where their stumbling blocks in their comprehension of the course material might be situated. The earlier specification of the journal assignment on the syllabus was about as straightforward as one could get – “keep a journal and do it weekly.”

However, the refurbishing of this very basic type of assignment presented immense opportunities for the development of the course-specific writing I had already deemed essential. The result was that the assignment now required more than an entire page of explanation and direction with the result that its outline became a lengthy supplement to, rather than one simple component of, the syllabus. According to the syllabus, each journal entry “must accomplish at least two of the following goals, and at some point the student in the journal must address *all* of the same goals”. These goals are:

- A short summary of what the topic was for that week, what the professor talked about in class, what other students said either in class or outside of class, what the student got out of the assigned readings.
- A brief statement of the problems the student encountered in understanding the material and the nature of those problems, if any. If the student did not encounter any problems in understanding, the student may reflect on what conceptual or intellectual issues he or she may have had with the material itself.
- A summary along with a thesis and account of what the student learned, or didn’t think they learned, in the weekly material. If the student had problems with the material, the summary should lay out the problems as long with an hypothesis about what the problem might be. NOTE: Students often think it is simply the responsibility of the instructor to make it “clear” to them, but that is an unacceptable and too passive approach.

In an “active learning” setting, which this course has, the student has an *equal responsibility* to take steps to resolve issues by either discussing the problem with the instructor, seeking help outside of class, or turning to peers within the group. Simply brushing the problem off with such statements as “I don’t get what art is all about” or “I’m not interested” or “this is much too abstract for me”, for example, is unacceptable. Some comments about how the student has been developing and deepening their own understanding of the relationship between art, thought, and spirituality, including perhaps some observations about “how my mind has changed”.

The journal is supposed to be turned in twice, once at the end of the fifth week of class and the final one by the last day of the course. The journal is simply checked, or not checked, the first time to see if the student has 1) met the goals of the assignment 2) completed the assignment with thoughtfulness and clarity 3) the degree to which the assignment utilizes good grammar and punctuation (though grammar and punctuation are not corrected). If the student is not meeting these goals, the student receives a brief explanation as to why. The second time the journal is graded in accordance with the aforementioned three criteria.

In short, the journal exercise, which actually takes up as much as a fifth of the total writing expected of the student during the quarter, is configured to promote a modicum of *active learning*. The student is obliged not only to report impressionistically on what they heard, or read, or thought about, but to reflect strenuously through a prescribed writing regimen what they feel they do not understand, where are the gaps, and even what are the deficiencies from the student’s own perspective. The usual complaint of students, which standard university evals unfortunately encourage them to make, is that the “professor

didn't do enough", or something of that order, to make sense out of the material. Through the writing intensive modality the student has to wrestle not only with their own commitments, inabilities, or blind sides but with the *process* of evaluating the problems as well. *And they have to make the process clear not only to themselves, but to the instructor as part of what amounts to a significant segment of the course grade.* Most journal writing in a pedagogical setting tends to be passive and a well camouflaged prosthesis for the lazy-minded, including the instructors themselves. This assignment leverages some conventional techniques for improving English composition to immerse the student in the rigors of content mastery as a whole, to which the course in terms of "core knowledge" criteria also gives very special attention.

A second key dimension of this course, as specified in both its previous and present incarnations, consists in teaching students to "interpret" important esthetic artifacts, the meaning and interpretations of which are *not only not obvious*, but pose a challenge to those who do not possess "the language skills" to engage and comprehend them. Again, the enhancement of this dimension of the course through writing intensive protocols has major benefits that go far beyond simply "teaching good writing." The earlier version of these sorts of "art-object hermeneutics" style of exercise tended to stress only explicating what the artifact was "all about." On past occasions students tended to parrot or embellish the way in which I as the instructor in lectures had already talked about the artifacts while evincing the all-too-familiar anxiety and obsessiveness common to undergraduates about "saying just what the professor wants."

The bare-bone text of the assignment, as stated on the syllabus, is as follows. The first sentence refers to the fact that the course is divided into four different thematic modules on the concept of creativity as well as the verbal and visual arts.

During each of the four modules students will write short essays (750-1000) words each) on specific "artifacts", such as a special reading selection, a painting, or a poem relevant to that section. The paper must address the following questions: How does the artifact

bring together the different methods and focus an understanding of the data presented in the module? How does it show the relationship between the artistic and the spiritual? How does it illumine the process of creativity and its relationship to thought and spirituality?

Since, of course, each artifact is different, the more detailed instructions that will be given out to these sorts of assignments (two additional exercises of a similar nature are done in class) have now been modified to necessitate that the student reflect on how *they are writing what they are writing about*, as if the two approaches depended entirely on each other. The wording of an early assignment for the course, refurbished from its original version which amounted more or less to just the first three sentences, has now been expanded to have the student write on the task of writing about the material itself.

The painting shown above is Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition No. 8* (1923), which is also being projected on to the screen right now. In his book *The Spiritual in Art*, which, we have talked about in class you should have read for the most part by now, Kandinsky identifies and explains what he means by the "spiritual" dimensions of a painting. Write a draft of a short, exploratory essay of 200-400 words in which you identify the "spiritual elements" that you see in this individual painting. Describe in your own words exactly what you see in this painting and how your description illustrates Kandinsky's criteria for "the spiritual". At the same time, make sure in your writing you pay attention and endeavor to communicate, as you are asked to do in the journal, what it is you personally find "problematic" in identifying these elements of spirituality and the degree to which you think you have problems correlating your criteria for recognizing these elements to Kandinsky's own criteria, as laid out in the book we are reading by him. To what degree do you think the "problem" lies with you, with Kandinsky, or with the assignment itself, and why? Most problems are more complex than the way we consider them at first glance.

I fully expect that students will have a difficult time writing about their own sense of



what is “problematic” in both mastering the course material and in their own writing. Students are accustomed to viewing a university education as one of “customer service” with the professor supposedly providing the kind of product they expect. Writing is often seen as an instrument of exchange in the academic setting. The work the student performs serves as the coin of the realm to purchase the product that is supposedly delivered by the educational provider.

Rarely is writing seen as the medium whereby learning actually takes place. In a course like this one, however, the writing assignments bring into relief the nature of the very challenges and difficulties involved in what is often and misleadingly termed the “appreciation” of the arts. The writing assignments are no more add-ons to the course. They configure the structure and direction of the conceptual material itself in such a way that the students begin to ask questions they would not be accustomed under normal circumstances to ask.

