

HARKNESS STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Excellent teaching is a process. It requires continuous reassessment of methods and materials, collaboration with colleagues, and the flexibility to change tack mid-stream in response to students' needs. I have found all of these things vital throughout the trajectory of my teaching career as I have progressed from English as a foreign language, to Russian language, literature and culture and now art history.

While these may seem like disparate subjects requiring varying methodologies, lessons I learned through language teaching have proven valuable to me as an instructor of art history. One of the main tenets of language pedagogy is to get the students actively involved in the learning process from the very first minutes of class. When students realize that they can learn simple phrases such as "Hello." "My name is Kate." "What is your name?" in the first five minutes of their first day of class, they relax and engage. I take the same approach to my introductory art history courses by showing the students an obscure, but not atypical, work of art and asking them to tell me what they see on the first day of class. As they volunteer information I introduce terms and reinforce the fact that they already possess the rudimentary skills they need to analyze art, what they lack is the technical and historical knowledge needed to produce complex analyses, which the course will give them in time. I have found that, much like learning how to say "Hello" and introduce yourself on the first day of language class, this exercise gets students engaged and more comfortable participating from the start.

Another important aspect of good teaching is continual reinforcement of what students have already mastered. As Dr. Buffington, one of my earliest and most creative Russian instructors, once remarked, "Russian has a half-life of three days." Experience has shown me that art history is a more stable element, but, like any new skill, it also requires active reinforcement. I structure assignments as building blocks and in class I gently prod students to use their new vocabulary and build upon what they have learned.

In addition, my colleagues and I have found that one very effective way to get students to activate their newly acquired knowledge is to incorporate community resources whenever possible. This is not limited to museums and galleries, but public monuments and “ordinary” houses also serve as learning possibilities. I have found that getting them out into local arts institutions or just looking at architecture in their neighborhoods makes them reconsider the function of art in their lives and also makes them understand that art is very much alive, not just a dusty relic in a textbook.

Likewise, taking advantage of community resources available to me as an instructor has facilitated my own skill building process. The Center for Instructional Development and Distance Education at the University of Pittsburgh provides a wide range of workshops and community discussions that I have found valuable. For example, I have learned not only how to use Pitt’s Courseweb system, but also how to effectively deploy the technology to facilitate productive online discussions. The instructors from other departments that I have met in these sessions have also proven to be invaluable for their willingness to share ideas and approaches to teaching. These resources have helped me continue to evolve as a teacher.

I believe studying art history can benefit all students. In the present world, where students are constantly bombarded with images, art history can teach them how images both present and represent not only ideas, but also ideologies. I want them to understand how images speak to and are aimed at different audiences. To this end, I often use relevant examples from Russian and Soviet art to get students to stretch their newly acquired analytical skills and to show them that worlds of art exist beyond the canonical works we teach in surveys. For example, in a course on modernism, I may show a Soviet propaganda poster that seems ludicrous today, but was deadly serious during its own time.

As an instructor, I require a lot from students, but also from myself. I endeavor to create a classroom atmosphere that is rigorous, but open and enjoyable. I hope to inspire students to find their own passion in art, as I have found mine in the art of Russia. Most of all, however, I want students to come away from a course with me secure in their new knowledge and its relevance to their present and future lives.