

FOUNDATION FOR HUMANITIES

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When I was five years old my family moved from Utah to the underside of the globe, my father having accepted a teaching position at the Church College of New Zealand. Shortly after arriving in New Zealand, I started school at Hamilton West Elementary School, and for the next seven years was a pupil in the local public education system. Most of my teachers were male, and we always addressed them with the deferential title “Sir.” Whenever a teacher entered a classroom, all the pupils stood until they were invited to be seated. We began each school day by hearing “God save the Queen” played over the wireless and reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Strict discipline was maintained in the classroom and enforced by the teacher’s leather strap. Like the students at Harry Potter’s Hogwarts School, we wore uniforms and were divided into houses for the purpose of athletic competitions.

My whole educational paradigm was turned topsy-turvy when at twelve years of age I returned with my family to Utah and settled in the town of Springville. On the first day of school at Springville Junior High, I embarrassed myself when I was the only student who stood when our teacher entered the room. The other students snickered when the teacher called role (mine was the first name on the list) and I answered, “Present, Sir.” I was appalled at what seemed to me a general absence of discipline and a wanton disrespect for the teachers. Having been raised playing soccer, rugby, and cricket, I was completely lost in my first physical education class when we played American football. When time for our first test rolled around, I was entirely surprised when the teacher gave us a review sheet outlining what to expect on the test. I was equally astounded to discover that the test was comprised only of multiple-choice, matching, and true-false questions.

Making the transition from the British educational style to the American one was uncomfortable and disconcerting. Even the spelling was different. However, I gradually became accustomed to the American educational approach and soon learned to appreciate its strengths.

For the last year, I have faced a similarly challenging educational transition here at BYU–Idaho as a member of one of four teams assigned to develop a humanities course for the new Foundations program. This assignment has been every bit as disquieting as having my educational rug pulled out from under me in junior high, but I am hopeful that implementation of our new course will eventually turn out as well.

I had been teaching humanities at Ricks College/BYU–Idaho for nineteen years at the time I received the invitation to participate in

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designing a humanities Foundations course. I thought I already understood what students ought to know about the arts and what was effective in helping them learn it. Now President Clark was asking our committees to “rethink” both the content and the methodology of our course according to these parameters:

Humanities Foundations courses must not be something that students treat as “a hoop they have to jump through” before they can concentrate on gaining knowledge relevant to their careers.

Courses should dig deep into a topic rather than provide an overview of cultural history.

The topic should be literature based, but should also encompass the visual arts, music, and the performing arts.

Students should have deep, meaningful, and powerful experiences with the arts.

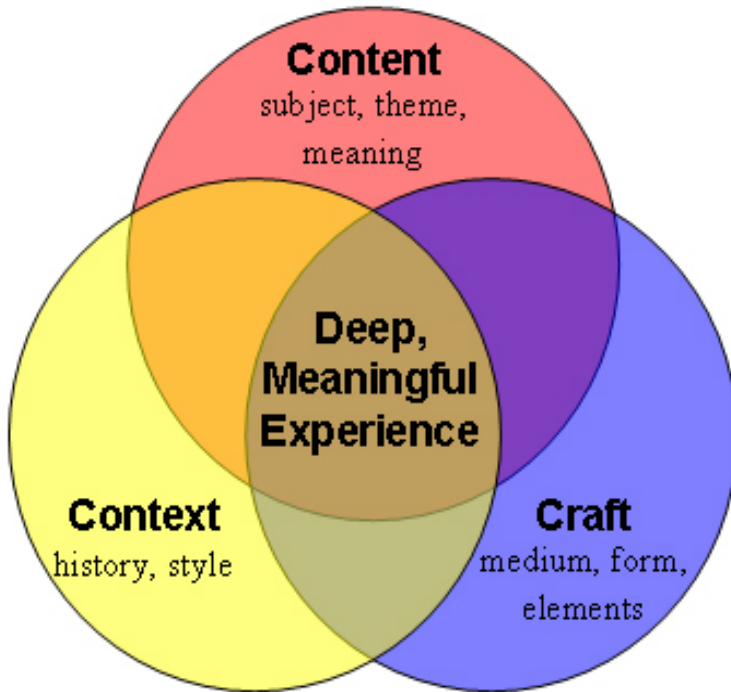
Students should understand the “craft” of art. They should understand how artists produce great art and what draws us to them.

Students should have some understanding of the political, social, and economic context from which art arises.

Our task seemed daunting as a flood of questions enveloped our minds. What topic would students find engaging that encompasses all the arts? What knowledge and skills must students develop to have rich aesthetic experiences? How can we dig deeply into a topic when most students don’t have the vocabulary to talk about art, or an understanding of the basic elements of the arts? Stated another way, how could we explore a work such as *The Odyssey* in any depth when most of our students don’t even know what an epic is?

In addition to President Clark’s mandates, we had our own aspirations for the course. If this was to be the only curricular opportunity for most BYU–Idaho students to experience the arts, we wanted to equip them with the knowledge and skills that would prepare them for a lifetime of art enjoyment and fulfillment. At some future time, we hoped our students would not embarrass themselves by applauding between movements while attending the symphony with a business client. Perhaps as a result of what they experienced in our course, students would help their own children enjoy a visit to an art gallery as part of a family vacation. We also wanted to help students develop a more mature sense of aesthetic judgment that would serve as a catalyst to raise the bar in their own consumption of literature, music, art, and cinema. Our challenge was to create a learning module for our courses that would fulfill both President Clark’s and our own expectations.

After much discussion within and among the four committees, we concluded that the recipe for deep, meaningful experiences with the arts included three main ingredients: content (the subject or theme of a work of art), context (the cultural and social circumstances that gave rise to the work), and craft (the materials, tools, and techniques artists use to express ideas and emotions). The question now was how to structure our course so as to integrate all three components:



We could not conceive of a way to address them all at once. To effectively drive a car with a manual transmission parked on a steep hill, one must be able to disengage the parking brake, release the clutch, and depress the accelerator all at once. It doesn't work very well to try to perform any of these actions independently. For students to have rich and powerful experiences in the arts, they must be able to bring together content, context, and craft. However, most students do not come prepared with sufficient knowledge of the craft and context of art to enable us to successfully integrate these with content. We must help them gain this knowledge before they are able to enter deeply into the arts.

Consider this example: suppose that in the exploration of our theme, we wish to have a rich and powerful aesthetic experience through examining the tenor aria "Ev'ry Valley" from Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. The text

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of the aria is taken from Isaiah 40:4, and is part a prophecy concerning the coming of Christ:

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low:
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.

We may wish to discuss how Handel uses a homophonic structure in the aria (in contrast to the counterpoint used in many of the choruses) in an effort to evoke the declarative nature of the scripture and allow the text to stand out. We note that the piece is in a major key as the text rejoices in the coming of Christ (in contrast to minor keys used in later pieces depicting Christ's suffering). We observe the clever tone painting which Handel employs, making the pitches of the melody ascend the scale on the word *exalted* and jump downward on the word *low*. He uses melismatic alternations of pitch on the word *crooked* to musically evoke the meaning of the word, and in contrast a sustained note on the word *straight*. In order to carry on such a conversation about this work, students would need to understand the following words and concepts: oratorio, aria, key, melodic texture, rhythm, orchestration, melisma, and tone painting. Knowing something of the Baroque musical style and the occasion for which the work was composed would also contribute to the richness of the aesthetic experience. How would students go about acquiring this knowledge, merely as background, in a thematic approach to the arts?

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Recognizing that our students could not learn content, context, and craft simultaneously, we had to determine where to begin and how to proceed so we could build up layers of knowledge and experience until they could ultimately have a deep, meaningful experience. Two of the four committees decided to collaborate in producing a series of online modules that would help students learn outside of class the craft component as it parallels the classroom activities centered on content and context. We planned to start the semester by introducing our theme with shorter, simpler works and build to those of greater magnitude as students worked through the modules and acquired a sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and concepts.

The following chart shows the structure and content of each module:

| Overview | Introduction: | I. Medium in the Arts | II. Elements of the Arts | III. Principles of Order | IV. Style | V. Aesthetic Judgment |
|----------------|---------------|---|--|--|---|-----------------------|
| A. Literature | | prose & verse, fiction & non-fiction; literary genres | rhyme, meter, figures of speech, alliteration, imagery, theme, point of view, etc. | poetic structure, narrative structure: plot—exposition, complication, denouement | individual style, literary movements | |
| B. Music | | instruments, voice, ensembles | rhythm, melody, harmony, tempo, dynamics | song form, sonata form, fugue, opera, oratorio, mass, etc. | distinctive features of musical periods | |
| C. Visual Arts | | oil, fresco, watercolor, mosaic, prints, bronze, marble, etc. | line, color, texture, value, perspective, etc. | Golden Mean, symmetrical & asymmetrical patterns | realism vs. stylization, historical styles | |
| D. Theater | | combined art forms, theater genres, live theater vs. film | acting, directing, costumes, make-up, set design, lighting, etc. | acts, scenes, rhythm | theatricality vs. verisimilitude, the auteur theory | |

A major concern in designing the modules was to help students develop a basic level of competency with the arts. There was a temptation to have students learn everything they might once have learned in the old General Education plan in the introductory courses for literature, art, music, and theater and film. We made a conscious effort to limit the content of each module to basic principles. Moreover, we wanted to blend learning and assessment in the design of the modules so as to encourage students to achieve true proficiency. Instead of presenting the material, giving a test, and hoping that students would be motivated to study hard for a good grade, we decided to require students to pass a minimum proficiency assessment for each module. If students do not achieve this level the first time through, we allow them to go back and review the concepts and terms they missed and retake the assessment as many times as necessary. Each instructor can decide how to reflect students' efforts with the modules in the overall course assessment.

We also wanted to design the modules to allow instructors maximum flexibility in applying them to their individual courses. Instructors will be able to choose how to utilize modules according to their own needs. Some may wish to assign students to complete the modules according to art form. Before undertaking the study of a major work of literature, for instance, the instructor may want students to complete all of the literature modules. Others instructors may wish to have students complete all of the medium modules, then the elements, and so on.

We believe the modules will also help address a broader Foundations issue that other committees have faced. One of President Clark's desires for Foundations courses is that they would be interdisciplinary and taught

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by faculty members from several departments. This means that many faculty members face the prospect of teaching subject matter outside their fields of expertise. The committee members assigned the task of developing the Foundations humanities courses came from a number of departments: English, Art, Music, Theater, Humanities, and History. A person trained in music knows how to help students gain sufficient knowledge of musical concepts to enable them to find meaning in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, but may feel unqualified or incapable of preparing them for a discussion of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. By using the online modules, faculty members need not worry about teaching the basic principles of those art forms with which they are not so familiar.

In addressing this issue of teaching outside one's field, administrators have suggested that committee members can train one another and any new faculty members who will eventually teach the course. But this is easier said than done. Our experience is that constraints on our time from our other responsibilities, added to the time spent on development of Foundations, leaves little time available for in-service training. The modules may also encourage some teachers to include in their courses content outside their field of expertise, instead of "playing to their strengths" as some have elected to do. In any event, the modules will provide students an opportunity to prepare for a lifetime of participation in all of the arts instead of only one or two. They may also serve as an in-service resource for current and future Foundations humanities teachers who would like to increase their knowledge of the arts beyond their own academic fields.

One more challenge we faced in designing our course was to create learning activities and assessments that were consistent with the non-traditional tenor of the course and which would actively involve students with the arts. We felt that the time-honored tradition of using exams and research papers to assess learning were inadequate for our course. Throughout the course development process we met regularly with administrators and support staff to whom we expressed our need for help with assessment. All we ever got was the platitude, "We'll look into it." We ended up designing learning activities and assessments which we hoped would allow students to find their own meaning and significance instead of focusing on what they anticipated would be on the test. These include daily journal entries through which students express something meaningful from classroom activities or readings, learning projects whereby students connect our course theme with their own lives, and attendance at cultural events.

As I write this, we are two weeks into the semester. It is still too early to gauge how successful our efforts have been in achieving the goals of the Foundations program and our own desires for the course. At this point

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I have mixed feelings about the success of the course. It has been very satisfying to collaborate with faculty members from other departments in designing and implementing the course. I have also enjoyed exploring our course theme, The Heroic Journey Through Creation, Fall, and Redemption, and the students also seem enthusiastic about it. However, I can already sense a need to reduce our curriculum, as we have grossly underestimated how much time our classroom activities consume. I believe this is due in large part to the necessity of spending much of our time laying a foundation of vocabulary and context in an effort to prevent freshmen students from floundering in the depths of a topic that is well above their knowledge base. I remain optimistic about the potential of the course to provide a meaningful experience for students, but I feel we have many challenges yet to face.

I conclude by listing a few questions that we who teach Foundations humanities yet need to address:

How will we overcome the inherent imbalance that the thematic approach creates in emphasizing literature at the expense of music, visual art, and the performing arts?

What can we do to reduce the anxiety of faculty members who face the prospect of teaching a curriculum outside their area of expertise?

How will we allow learning outcomes to determine learning activities instead of encouraging the tail of methodology to wag the dog of content?

How we handle these issues will likely determine whether Foundations Humanities will ultimately be satisfying for students and faculty alike.∞

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