



Creating Connections between Disciplines: What Paintings Can Teach Students about Politics

THE LIBERAL ARTS environment demands that faculty show students connections between disciplines. As a political scientist, I often link course topics with economics, history, and sociology, but last summer I realized that I could make linkages with visual art. Because I was soon traveling to Washington, D.C. and New York City, I could take pictures of paintings at the National Gallery of Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art and then utilize them in my Introduction to World Politics classes.

While in these galleries, I found that I could use paintings that showcased political leaders or events, but also make use of artistic methods to convey concepts. Some political scientists have developed courses on art and politics, focusing on propaganda, how art connects with social movements, and how governments promote culture and nationalism. Although I have talked about these subjects, my more limited goals in this

endeavor were to enable political leaders to better “come alive” for students, assist students in understanding concepts, and add more color to my PowerPoint slides. For other faculty members—especially historians, political scientists, and sociologists—interested in following in a similar path of using paintings (or other forms of visual art), here are the steps to follow.

First, think about how paintings can introduce leaders. For example, rather than assuming that students know what Napoleon looked like, show one of his portraits. I used Jacques-Louis David's 1812 portrait of Napoleon from the National Gallery of Art. To help convey Napoleon's ego, I showed David's 1807 *The Coronation of Napoleon* in which Napoleon (not the pope) crowns himself emperor.

Second, consider how paintings can illustrate important events. Since 2013 was nearing the centenary of World War I, paintings that showed nationalism during that time were especially relevant. One painting I used is Childe Hassam's *Allies Day, May 1917* from the National Gallery of Art. This painting shows the American flag and allies' flags waving on Fifth Avenue a month after the United States entered the war.

Third, reflect on how paintings might connect with concepts in your discipline. Faculty should not only think about what art illustrates explicitly or implicitly, but how a piece was designed, as well as the medium (oil, watercolor, etc.) used. In my Introduction to World Politics class, a key concept is levels of analysis, defined as the scope to which analysts seek to understand the world whether through the actions of an individual, actions within a particular nation-state, or at the global level of the international system. Conveying

the individual, state, and systemic levels of analysis is critical for my course, especially since levels of analysis are employed throughout the textbook. Although I have talked about this concept in many ways, it was while I was going through these art museums that I remembered how a student a few years ago connected levels of analysis—sometimes called micro and macro approaches in other disciplines—to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

Thus, I found myself looking at Vincent Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Cypresses* (1889) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and thinking about this student's comment. So, I took photos of the painting from several feet away and up close. I also walked to the side of the painting to photograph the heavy amount of paint Van Gogh applied. I then used these pictures to illustrate that, like levels of analysis, Impressionists and Post-Impressionists called upon viewers to look at their works up close and far away and found that they could see different things. I also showed Claude Monet's 1880 work *Île aux*

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The author used Childe Hassam's *Allies Day, May 1917* to show how paintings reflected the times.

Fall Break - Oct. 13-14
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“She Didn’t Teach. We Had to Learn it Ourselves.”

YESTERDAY I GOT AN email from a faculty member who had just received her spring semester student ratings (yes, in August, but that’s a topic for another post). She’d gotten one of those blistering student comments. “This teacher should not be paid. We had to teach ourselves in this course.” I remember another faculty member telling me about similar feedback, which was followed later with a comment about how the course “really made me think.”

So, the criticism is one of those backhanded compliments. The teacher is making students figure out things for themselves. They are doing the hard, messy work of learning. This is a style of teaching that promotes learning, but that’s not how students see it. Based on experiences in lots of other classrooms, they have come to believe that “good” teachers tell students what they need to know. If a teacher makes the students come up with examples when she has a perfectly good list she could be giving them, that teacher is not doing her job. My friend and colleague Larry Spence wrote about this same issue in April, 2004 issue of *The Teaching Professor* newsletter. “They expect a steady progression along a learning curve, which coincides with the amount of time they spend in classes. ... Everything else — their personal struggles to master knowledge and skills in sports, software, games, or music they take to be ‘teaching yourself’ and an inferior way of learning.”

In addition to violating expectations, students respond negatively to this style of teaching because most of them want learning

to be easy. When they have to come up with examples, answers, or solutions, that’s more work than being told by the teacher, and there’s the added stress of not knowing whether the examples are good, the answers are right, or the solutions correct. When learning isn’t easy, a lot of students question their intellectual wherewithal, but that’s not a problem they have to face if the fault lies with the teacher.

Getting students to understand what we are doing and why starts by recognizing that what’s obvious to us isn’t obvious to them. When I took an introductory chemistry course with a group of beginning students, the instructor used an approach in the lab that drove us nuts. He refused to answer questions. If you asked him a question, he responded by asking you a question. The students (and me, for a while) thought he was being obstinate, or trying something he thought was clever. Then one day when the solution in our beaker changed color and started boiling like mad even though the Bunsen burner was set as low as it would go, he cruised over, sniffed our solution and asked us a question. Thinking the liquid might be about to explode, we shut down the Bunsen burner and started talking about what we thought was happening. After some discussion, we figured out what was going on with our experiment. It was then that somebody pointed out that we had just answered the question the instructor asked us 15 minutes ago.

The instructor’s technique was good, but he should have explained what he was doing or asked us why we thought he wouldn’t

answer questions during lab. Some lab groups never figured it out. In the seminar section I taught that accompanied the course we had a heated discussion about whether teachers were obligated to answer student questions. Virtually all the students thought it was part of a teacher’s job.

If teachers are going to refuse to do something students expect, especially if students think it’s something they believe makes the learning easier, how teachers refuse to help is important. “I will help, but not until you’ve got some answers, part of the solution, a few examples.” “I am not going to give you the answers, but I will give you feedback on your answers. By the end of class, we’ll have a set of good answers.”

Weaning students from their dependence on teachers is a developmental process. Rather making them do it all on their own, teachers can do some of the work, provide part of the answer, or start with one example and ask them for others. The balance of who’s doing the work gradually shifts, and that gives students a chance to figure out what the teacher is doing and why.

It’s unsettling when students make comments about how we aren’t doing our jobs. It’s easy to respond defensively or to think derisively about students. But those responses don’t make students less confused about what it means to teach and what it takes to learn.

MaryEllen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; “She Didn’t Teach. We Had to Learn it Ourselves.”; Faculty Focus; September 10, 2014 [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/didnt-teach-learn/>]; October 6, 2014.

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Fleurs near Vétheuil from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to ensure that students understood how levels of analysis connected with this particular method of painting.

International relations scholars contend researchers have many choices in which to analyze cause and effect, a “level of analysis problem.” Thus, students must be taught that the actions of important leaders can shape history. But they must also learn to widen their scope to focus upon domestic politics within a country as well as the dynamics of the international system. Therefore, I showed students how viewers can back away from works by Van Gogh and Monet and move

from seeing individual brush strokes of a particular color to seeing different shapes, and then a beautiful scene.

These are just a few ways paintings can help teach about politics; there are many others. If Cleveland (2014) is correct, infusing art into the classroom will become easier in the future.

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Reference:

Cleveland, Carter. (2014). “Cleveland Carter Says Art in the Future will be for Everyone.” *The Wall Street Journal*. July 7. http://online.wsj.com/news/article_email/carter-cleveland-says-art-in-the-future-will-be-for-everyone-1404762157-1MyQjAxMTA0MD EwOTExNDkyWj?tesla=y.

Samuel Lucas McMillan, PhD; Teaching and Learning; “Creating Connections between Disciplines: What Paintings Can Teach Students about Politics.”; Faculty Focus; September 5, 2014; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/creating-connections-disciplines-paintings-can-teach-students-politics/>]; September 15, 2014.