

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE:

A STUDY OF THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND STUDIO PEDAGOGY, HOW IT
RELATES TO PROJECT-BASED LEARNING, AND HOW I MIGHT
INCORPORATE IT TO IN MY HISTORY CLASSES TO KEEP THEM MORE
RELEVANT AND THE STUDENTS ENGAGED.

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Introduction.

As a 25 plus year veteran of the classroom it is easy to become complacent and teach lessons that have been taught before. However, as a history teacher thinking about why my job is still relevant in the lives of our youth, I have to think about what being a history teacher means to me. If the role of the history teacher is to pass on content knowledge of who, what, when, and where events happened then maybe we are becoming redundant with the now easy access to this information through technology. However, if the role of the history teacher is to teach students to become thinking members of society able to synthesize, analyze, and debate, to compare, contrast and evaluate primary and secondary sources, and to communicate, collaborate and reflect on and about decision-making, then it is important for the history teacher to remain relevant, and for my classes to continue to engage my students so that they can learn these skills.

In all my years of teaching I have always contended that making connections in the classroom means that students need to believe that what you are teaching them is important and relevant to them and that you can and will help them to learn. Making connections also means that you as a teacher need to believe it is worthwhile to build a learning community in your classroom, to know and understand your students well enough to have them contribute to choices of content and instruction so that all students get the opportunity to learn. Although I feel that I do build learning communities in my classroom I would like to challenge myself to introduce more technology into my classes and relinquish

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some of the autonomy in favor of the students engaging in more decision making about their learning.

In my quest to remain current and address these challenges, I came across a number of references to studio pedagogy which piqued my interest. The references to collaboration and metacognitive skills sounded like something that I would want to pursue. This report will discuss why the common, traditional methodology of history teaching has become less relevant, what the principles of studio pedagogy are, and why it is a good fit for teaching history.

Discussion surrounding traditional history classroom teaching

For many years we have been used to walking past classrooms seeing row upon row of students facing the front of the room with the teacher lecturing at the front or writing copious notes on a board which the students were then required to copy, followed by the regurgitation of material in the form of a test or a paper. Despite increasing amounts of evidence to support the contention that this does not lead to life-long knowledge, many classes continue to follow this pattern. Even with the radical changes in methods of communications in society, teaching has changed little over the years.

“99 percent of teaching spaces were anticipated either in an image of an ancient Syrian palace school 4,000 years ago or in the Greek amphitheater: rows or rings of seats meant to focus the attention of the many on the one. But education is not about transferring information from one to man; it is about learning within the student. When printed books were new,

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transferring information was vital, but today, information is ubiquitous and readily available, and students can pick it up when and where they want. Instead, the classroom ought to focus on assimilation and application of knowledge to new contexts. The teacher becomes the guide on the side, instead of the sage on the stage, requiring wholly new learning spaces and teaching techniques.” Eric Mazur (2012, Qtd in Lambert, 2012)

In his thesis, Tew (2014) provides an interesting discussion on the traditional style of classroom delivery of history where the course invariably begins with a timeline and the teacher lectures his/her way through the events on the timeline from beginning to end (or in many cases, to where they run out of time). This form of history teaching provides little opportunity for students to actually engage with the material or obtain any real depth of learning. Eric Mazur from Harvard University presents that lectures “are a way of transferring the instructor’s notes to student notebooks without passing through the brains of either”. Whereas interactive learning, or learning where the students participate in obtaining knowledge through discovery, has been found to be up to three times more effective in retention and understanding of knowledge (Lambert, 2012).

The importance of play in student learning.

Discovery begins in childhood; an infant is never still, exploring their fingers and toes, poking their hands in their mouths followed by every other object they can obtain. As a child grows they continue to explore and play. They are engaged when playing, they spend extended periods of time exploring their surrounds and inventing solutions to solve perceived problems. There is no doubt that play must

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be seen as a learning tool; that so much of what we know as adults we have learned through play as a child. David W. Orr argues that “the best learning often occurs when children spend unplanned and uncounted hours outside investigating, experimenting, exploring, and playing – which is to say spontaneously and delightfully designing their own curriculum.” Even psychologist Jean Piaget believed that the principal goal of education is “to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive, and discoverers”, surely if this is so, then we must give students the opportunity to learn through exploration, not merely through instruction. Far too often we sit students in a class room expecting them to absorb information that is presented to them whilst they are in a passive state. If play is learning and play is active then learning must also be active. It is only when a child truly explores an object, pulling it apart and putting it back together that he or she fully understands it. This is a different, deeper understanding than can be gleaned from reading the instructional manual.

Studio pedagogy draws on the many elements of play by being social and collaborative, allowing for and encouraging many different learning tools, and encouraging the acceptance of multiple solutions to a single problem. It relies on students possessing many and different creative thinking processes to create a solution to a problem posed.

Definition of Studio Pedagogy and discussion surrounding this definition.

Studio-based learning in America can be traced back to John Dewey’s Laboratory School in Chicago in the late 1800’s (Lackney, 1999). However defining studio pedagogy is not an easy task. There are many well-known and respected writers

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in this field and their definitions of studio pedagogy vary tremendously. However, there is general consensus that studio pedagogy is based on design thinking and design thinking is described as a mind-set. It is human centered, collaborative, experimental, reflective, and optimistic (in that there is a solution to all problems). The major characteristics of the studio are that learners are producing work, of which they take ownership, and that they work both individually and collaboratively in some way. These activities may be designed by the teacher or collaboratively amongst the students. Teachers provide, along with other students, guidance, suggestions, and creative and technical input. The teacher is not the omniscient authority in the classroom deciding when a piece of work is 'finished'. The work of the individual is supported and further developed through the interaction of the group. Commentary by peers and or teachers to work in progress with an opportunity for the expectation to revise the composition ensures that what is to be communicated is done so more successfully. Students are encouraged by the group leader to explain their assignments, to teach the other group members the terms and concepts taught to them by others, to recall class discussions of readings or issues for writing, to brainstorm in front of the group and with the group about the topics, to read the drafts, to recompose pieces of drafts, to revise parts and whole of drafts, to figure out what is meant by reviewers comments on projects, and to make decisions about research and composition processes (next steps) with group members. This goes far beyond the traditional one draft feedback with edits from the teacher. Presenting work for one's own and other group member's reflection allows the producer to use the help of group members to generate ideas and refine not only approaches to

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content but also processes in attitudes toward the work. Students are not receivers of information, but rather shapers of knowledge.

The space in which studios take place is also unique, able to evolve as student work evolves so as to accommodate their needs. Studios do not require any specific requirements; however they do require a dedicated space conducive to the kind of production and interactions that make collaboration possible. A standard sized classroom is suitable as students should be in fairly close proximity for group intimacy. Studio classrooms tend to be well resourced; the room might have posters or other appropriate or interesting visuals on the wall, especially materials that enhance the work at hand. Reference materials, guides, sample documents, magazines, newspapers, and writing materials in the environment both visually signal and support the multilayered literacies and interests' that studio students bring. The work surface, equipment, and resources accommodate the people representing the different abilities, interests, and intelligences and facilitate group work and the awareness of text in different kinds of communications.

Much of the work done in studios is multi-modal in presentation and process offering more students the opportunity to respond creatively to the assignment prompt and demonstrate their strengths. The focus that the New London Group (1996) brought to composition, that it went beyond the linguistic to include aural, visual, gestural and spatial is paramount in identifying studio pedagogy. Students are encouraged to use all these elements in the process and production of their learning, a traditional paper may not be the best way to demonstrate what has been learned.

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Brocato (2009) presents the central element of studio based learning as ‘propose, critique, iterate’ and argues that it provides for person-centered classroom management. In other words, that learning occurs from a person’s interactions with important others in their social world and from the assessment of those interactions. Her point is that students who are highly engaged with their inquiries, and who are given the task of presenting that information to their peers and the world beyond in an interesting way, will learn more efficiently and with less inclination to disturb the flow of learning.

Due to the collaborative nature of studio pedagogy it is often confused with other similar pedagogies such as project-based learning, or just plain old group work.

What makes studio pedagogy different from project based learning.

Project-based learning has been around for many years and includes many of the principles that are exhibited by studio-based learning. The simplest description of cooperative inquiry (of which both pedagogies are) is that it is a way of doing research in which all those involved contribute both to the creative thinking that goes into the enterprise, deciding on what is to be looked at, the methods of the inquiry, and making sense of what is found out, and also to the action which is the subject of the research.

Both pedagogies often invite students to work in groups to produce a product (usually designed by the teacher in PBL and by the students in SBL), both ask students to self-regulate their time and attention to task. However there are significant differences between the two styles of teaching with studio-based

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learning including greater importance on metacognitive skills and less importance on the completion of a final product.

The focus in studio pedagogy is on the process of production by discussing progress regularly, bringing a piece of work or question about their work to the studio group, getting feedback from others in the group, and giving helpful feedback to the others. Students learn from one another about course content, about the diversity of one another's thinking by way of the convergent and divergent approaches each takes to accomplish the task, and are better able to reflect on their own thinking processes as a result. I have found that learning is most effective when students can connect new information with previous experience. When students encounter new information, they must be able to link it to what they already know; it must become a building block to a greater entity. If the new knowledge cannot be connected with prior knowledge and understanding, it will not be remembered, used, and integrated into new learning situations. Successful learners know how to learn, further developing learning strategies they already use by creating new strategies to address learning challenges. Successful learners can also monitor how these strategies are working and what they need to generate alternative methods to meet their needs and goals. This metacognitive process enables students to better understand the rhetorical and compositional situations that they will encounter in academic work in all fields and at all levels.

Disadvantages or Roadblocks.

I have found that one of the greatest challenges in using studio pedagogy is convincing both students and sometimes parents that the most important aspect

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of the project has been the process and not the final product. This is especially the case if a product looks good but the student does not get a great grade. It is often possible for a student to submit a beautifully presented product that contains very little substance or reflects very little meta-cognitive development.

Grading students has always incorporated some subjectivity from the teacher, the focus on process as mentioned previously is part of one of the roadblocks teachers face when trying to incorporate studio pedagogy in their classes. As a teacher it is challenging to demonstrate how grades are awarded, especially if it is the process rather than the product that is assessed. Rewarding the student with a 'good grade' because they have challenged him/herself cognitively, and reflected on their processes when their peers observe they did not produce a complex finished product, and giving a 'lesser grade' to the student who submits the gorgeous, colorful poster but has learned little about their learning, is not always easy. Generating an acceptance of the type of learning that is required from the beginning of the course is paramount and is most often most effectively achieved through explicit instruction that what I expect is intellectual development, not merely an ability to demonstrate content knowledge.

This issue of grading is applicable to students but also to parents. However parents can also have concerns over the fact that the studio class may cover a narrower field of material than other classes as studio based pedagogy is often more concerned with depth of knowledge of a narrower field than breadth or survey courses. In my experience parents may show concern that their child is not covering 'enough material', this should be addressed at the commencement of the course rather than being left to the final reporting period. There are a number

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of studies that support the notion that ‘less is more’, meaning that exposing students to less information – but covering it in more depth- can lead to better learning (Lackney, 1999). Careful explanation of this concept to the parents at the onset can circumvent issues later on.

There is also a shift in the power relationship between student and teacher and in the nature of discourse in the studio. The teacher (studio leader) is not the only authority in the classroom, rather he/she acts as a facilitating expert for the group, elicits critique and other feedback from the students, keeps the group moving along so one student does not dominate, and otherwise organizes the curricula. An experienced educator can recognize when instruction or an outside resource is needed, and can provide it at the point of need. I have found that acceptance of this transition of power structure can take some getting used to, so many of us have been used to the constructivist model of being in control, now the teacher becomes the “guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage” (Mazur quoted in Lambert, 2012).

With the orientation toward responding to what students say, and do, and need, and not toward dictating a set curriculum to cover content, the studio group might look and sound chaotic with many individuals speaking at once and students moving around the room; but giving time to each student’s work is the structure that matters most. My own experience is that it is important for teachers to let the administration know what they are doing so that administrators observing this apparent chaos are not left wondering if anyone is in charge. I describe my classes as ‘dynamic’, not chaotic.

Classrooms that make it work.

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I am fortunate that I work in a small boarding school with an administration that is highly supportive of teacher research and innovation. There are a number of classes aside from mine being taught along the guidelines of the studio model covering curriculum as diverse as Outdoor Adventure, Biology, Literature, and Writing.

In my history classes I have relinquished my old project handouts stipulating the format for assignments in favor of student designed outcomes. I am spending more time discussing with students what they think they know before I introduce information about a topic and then we spend time reflecting upon what we feel we have learned over the course of the project, both in terms of content but also in terms of skills. I spend less of my class time lecturing and more working individually with students as they need the information. To facilitate this, I have uploaded more content in the form of video and power point presentations onto a web page for students to access as they need the information. I have also reorganized the seating arrangement in my classroom to better encourage discussion and collaborative activity. My students appear to be more engaged as they self-direct their projects and the quality of their written assessment tasks is as good if not better than in previous years. However, almost all are more self-assured when discussing the material that we have been studying than they were at the beginning of the year. Obviously this could be as a result of feeling more comfortable in their surroundings; however the depth of their discussion makes me believe that this confidence stems from being more connected to their learning. As a high school teacher, these classes are directed at students from grades 8 through 12, however there are examples of this pedagogy being successfully integrated at all grade levels.

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The Blue School (pre K – 8) in New York City has evolved out of a children’s playgroup established by the Blue Man Group in 2006. Founder Matt Goldman states that the development of their program focused on removing the “kinds of educational practices that we believe are not working so well and amp up the "best practices" and innovations that we believe have great promise. We draw from powerful influences, old and new, and re-combine these influences with cutting-edge research and a few of our own flourishes to create something the world has never seen”. The website states that they “have created an educational program where creativity is cherished and encouraged and where children fall in love with the joy of learning”. All classes are taught using studio pedagogy.

Wheaton High School in Silver Spring, Maryland broke ground in October 2013 on a \$128 million project based on rebuilding its campus and redesigning its curriculum around the teaching technique, there will no longer be an abundance of lecture-style classrooms but rather smaller meeting rooms where students can work on projects. The project is expected to be completed early in 2016. A growing number of American colleges are developing studio spaces (The Noel Studio at Eastern Kentucky University, Illinois State University, Miami University, Ohio State University, Harvard University,) in lieu of the traditional writing center where students are encouraged to create multi-modal compositions.

Reflection/Next

I believe that the learning of history and the particular discourse features and rhetoric’s used in writing about history content lend themselves to the use of studio pedagogy, for that reason I am incorporating it into my classes. Studio pedagogy encourages teachers like me to use frequent writing exercises, often in-

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formal and ungraded, to help learners probe what they know, what they need to learn, and ways to think about what they study. Assessment in studio pedagogy is much broader in nature than the linguistic model and therefore easily embraces the project style assessments that I have always done. More and more students work in co-operative groups to complete a single multi-modal product such as a radio broadcast or a photographic essay rather than the few traditional formats of typical written assignment (short answer and essay). I have found it more effective for the development of student analysis of events and concepts to ask them to explore a topic in several short pieces of writing or activities for specific purposes and audiences either prior to, or in place of the traditional extended essay. Kenneth Bruffee states that “Writing to communicate is pedagogically more complex. It is based on theories of the social construction of knowledge”, students have to consider the prior knowledge of their audience when they are designing their composition. I am finding that my students have more empathy in studying a time period, they are more likely to ‘get inside the head’ of the subject of study.

The studio procedure to develop connections between the students is important in part because the world of work is based today on cooperation and teamwork. It is also important because teachers cannot hope to meet all the learning needs of all students unless students help each other. Studio pedagogy can nurture lifelong habits of teamwork and cooperation which are skills required to work efficiently in any organization. Active learning gives students the opportunity to learn from doing and from using peers as resources who may be able to explain new ideas in a way that is more relevant or understandable than teachers. It may also provide students an opportunity to learn by helping others learn, a skill that is proven to

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help solidify knowledge. This last point alone should be enough to encourage everyone to adopt these methods.

My classes often digress from the topic of study during reflective discussion and lead to discussions about the nature of knowledge and learning, students are becoming more aware of their growing metacognition. I am encouraging them to analyze their thinking and learning skills in order to develop better habits of the mind that will guide them in the future. These discussions often become animated with students providing thoughtful input into the redevelopment of assignments and learning opportunities for future classes. This constant input from my students invigorates me and gives my classes new energy. I really do believe that this new way for me to be approaching my teaching is making for better and more relevant learning for my students and will give them skills that they will continue to use long after they graduate High School.

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