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Bloom's Taxonomy for Art History. Blending A Skills-Based Approach into The Traditional Introductory Survey

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Abstract

The large-enrollment, lecture-based introductory survey still forms an essential part of art history curricula, particularly at public institutions of higher learning, despite recognition of some of its pedagogical drawbacks. This paper lays out the advantages of a blended model, one that adds student-centered activities in the form of team-based learning to the traditional lecture format. Bloom's taxonomy, translated for art history, became the logical framework for the types of activities and learning outcomes developed using team-based learning in this blended approach.

The first issue of *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* focused on the introductory art history survey. This article addresses a common survey problem not touched upon there, namely the implicit rather than explicit approach to the building of skills required for success.[1] These include: learning how to look, prioritizing visual observations, outlining the pieces of a logical argument, writing the argument up clearly, and contextualizing it within a historical framework. As Julia Sienkewicz has argued, coverage should no longer be the driving force of introductory syllabi in the history of art; syllabi need to focus more on the understanding and application of core concepts.[2] This involves learning about and acquiring a particular skill set, something many students cannot easily do from lectures alone.

While superb lectures can be inspiring, research indicates that watching someone else model skills in lecture is not as effective as making students themselves practice those skills.[3] This is especially true now, when many students can be so easily distracted in lecture by technology, surfing the web on their laptops, or texting on their mobile phones. Even those who pay rapt attention and are entranced by the lecture (and lecturer) do not always understand and can rarely apply the basic art historical principles that undergird what they have seen and heard. The predominantly descriptive (as opposed to interactive) approach of the standard survey textbooks compounds the problem of getting students to engage actively with the material. In courses where students break into smaller weekly sections often led by teaching assistants, fostering discussion—let alone practice—can be difficult. Even in such small groups, students often remain passive spectators, coming to class unprepared and expecting to be spoon-fed the material.

A 2014 STEM study concluded that its results "raise questions about the continued use of traditional lecturing…and support active learning as the preferred, empirically validated

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 2015 College Art Association (CAA) panel co-organized by Leda Cempellin and Julia Sienkewicz, "Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn: Developing a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Art History." I am grateful to them both for that invitation, to Julia for her comments on my initial draft for the panel and to the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for a Fellowship in Innovative Teaching for 2014–15. I would also like to thank Dr. Ken Rath for his help with sources and Dr. Gabriela Weaver for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Julia Sienkewicz, "Against the 'Coverage' Mentality: Rethinking Learning Outcomes and the Core Curriculum," *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* 1.1 (2016), 3.

[3] Research on this issue has focused on the STEM disciplines (another reason AHPP is so needed). For two studies, see P. Terenzini, et al., "Collaborative Learning vs. Lecturing/Discussion: Students' Reported Learning Gains," *Journal of Engineering Education* (January 2001), 123–30 and S. Freeman, et al., "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111.23, (2014), 8410–15.

teaching practice in regular classrooms."[4] But lecture-based art history surveys are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Like many public institutions, my university still offers a number of them in art and architectural history. Four large survey-level courses, including the introductory art history sequence, are currently offered. These count towards the campus's General Education requirements and enroll some 600 students each year. The department recently introduced two more topical surveys (Asian Art and The Art of Venice) that it plans to grow to the same size.

None of the private colleges in the Five College consortium still offers such traditional surveys.[5] They prefer theme-focused seminars instead, even at the introductory level. Smaller classes afford the opportunity to interact with students closely and better assess their needs. They generally require considerable student accountability and engagement, as there is nowhere to "hide." This is all exemplary, but the current importance attached to numbers of students taught on public campuses like mine means that the offering of large introductory surveys is unlikely to change in the near future. My department has had to look for other ways to achieve some of the same accountability, assessment, and skills-building fostered in smaller classes and to use different tools to encourage deeper engagement with the material. One part of the solution lay in developing interactive online homework assignments, which are described in detail in an earlier publication.[6] A second part came with the development of team–based approaches to teaching and learning: the focus here. Given that our two-semester art history sequence is team-taught (each instructor gives 6-8 lectures), it is not currently possible to change the lecture portion. Thus, these team-based approaches were applied in Art History 100 in 2014 and again in 2015 to reinvigorate the weekly discussion sections where the TAs wound up lecturing, because the students wouldn't discuss.

Team-Based Learning (TBL)
The main purpose of team-based learning (TBL) is to shift the classroom experience. In the traditional lecture-based mode of instruction, students individually acquire course concepts and content from lectures. A TBL model moves away from only telling

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[4] Freeman, et al, "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics."

[5] The Five Colleges are Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith Colleges, and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

[6] Laetitia La Follette, "Blending New Technologies into the Traditional Art History Lecture Course," in Kelly Donahue-Wallace, Laetitia La Follette and Andrea Pappas, eds., *Teaching Art History with New Technologies: Reflections and Case Studies* (Newcastle UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 44–56.

students how the professors interpret something, instead making them come up with their own interpretations.[7] For students to understand the power of art, they have to learn what it is to become art historians and then do it themselves. That means working to find their own meanings and interpretations, which requires synthesis and creativity. The aim is placed on the active application of these concepts and content with students organized in teams that work together on projects that help reinforce learning. Class activities center around what students need to learn to do, so course objectives go beyond the mere memorization of facts. Most importantly, the responsibility for learning shifts from the instructor to the student.
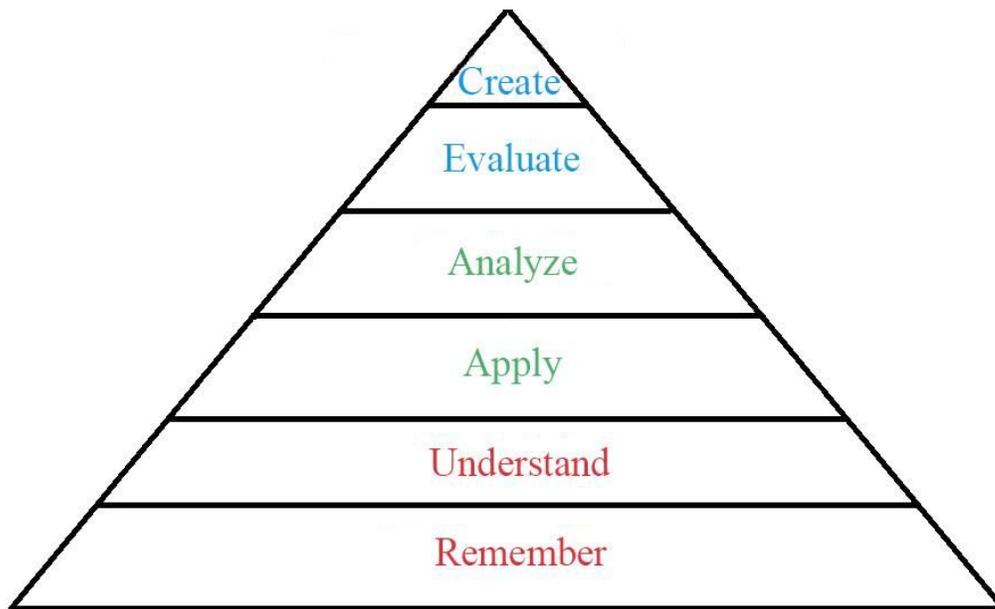
The introduction of TBL into the Fall 2014 Art History 100 class necessitated significant thought about what students at the survey level need to learn to do. Because there is so little scholarship on standards of teaching and learning (SoTL) in art history, the lack of TBL literature appropriate to art history is lacking. This project required going back to the drawing board and resulted in a first stab at translating Bloom's taxonomy in terms of art history. In the following pages, I discuss first this version of Bloom's pyramid and then the ways in which it became a logical framework for the types of TBL activities and learning outcomes for a blended approach to teaching the survey course.

Bloom's Taxonomy Chart as Applied to Art History
As a way to organize learning objectives and help guide curriculum development, a 1950s committee developed Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. Revised in 2001, this tool has continued to provide a framework for curricular and assessment design.[8] In a teaching and learning workshop I attended with the Art History 100 survey TAs at the beginning of the fall semester in 2014, it soon became clear that to use Bloom's pyramid successfully would require first translating its six layers for art history and providing specific examples of each skill at the survey level. My attempt at this, the subject of considerable discussion and debate and one sure to be refined, is presented in Figure 1.

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[7] For more on the principles of TBL with discussion of such aspects as the designing of effective teams as well as backward design, see M.K. Michaelsen, A.B. Knight, D.L. Fink, (eds.), *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Teams in College Teaching* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2004).

[8] L.W. Anderson and D.R. Krahlwohl, eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001). A useful summary by Mary Forehand (University of Georgia) may be found at: http://epltt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Bloom%27s_Taxonomy

Remember *Largely achieved by student independently* Can recall basic information (recognize, label)	→ The student can recognize works presented in class, recall tombstone information about them (title, culture, material, date, location), and correctly define basic art historical terms and specialized vocabulary.
Understand *Largely achieved by student independently* Can explain a concept in own words (describe, explain)	→ The student can describe and explain more complex concepts such as subject matter and iconography and understands that certain features indicate different chronological and regional styles
Apply Can use information in new context (classify, illustrate, select)	→ The student can draw on information presented in class and apply it to a new work of art, such as distinguishing an object by regional or artistic style by matching it to a known example (attributions or unknowns).
Analyze Can break down components of the work and interpret how they fit together vis-à-vis other examples (compare, contrast, differentiate)	→ The student can analyze the component parts of a work of art and compare it to one or more other examples to begin to differentiate it from them.
Evaluate	→ Drawing on such a comparative analysis, the

Can determine relative value of a work of art (judge, critique)	student can begin to evaluate the significance of the work of art and to develop an argument or thesis for its significance in its culture, time period. and/or the artist's oeuvre or body of work.
Create Can use information or combine information from various sources in new ways (hypothesize, design)	→ The student can assemble cogent, independent thoughts and form an argument based on various texts or objects described and discussed in class and put them together in a creative new design (i.e., curating a show).

Fig. 1: Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognition Applied to Art History

As noted in my earlier paper and reiterated by Sienkewicz in her article, art history examinations traditionally test survey students on material that falls in the lower sections of Bloom's pyramid: the layers of remembering, understanding, and application. This is in part because such information can be readily assessed on tests. The lowest one (remembering) lends itself to short tests on basic facts that students need to demonstrate they can recall in order to progress to the next level up (understanding), where they show they can explain concepts they have learned (i.e., iconography, subject matter, or stylistic changes). Both are needed to progress to the third stage (application), where their mastery of the earlier material allows them, for example, to attribute unknown works to a specific time and place.

But it is the next two layers of Bloom's pyramid—analysis (level 4) and evaluation (level 5)—that best describe the mastery of the comparison essay, the sustained comparative analysis and evaluation of two works of art that is the main goal of the surveys in my department. It was clear our survey students were not getting enough practice acquiring the skills needed for this type of assignment, be it on a test or in a paper, so in addition to adopting the TBL model of more frequent quizzing in section to encourage students to be prepared for class and their mastery of Bloom's bottom three areas, exercises were needed to help to improve student skills at analysis and evaluation. I also hoped to introduce a more creative component as well, per the final, sixth level of Bloom's pyramid (creation). This is a lot to fit in in the course of a semester, but the TBL approach seemed promising. The following describes the two team projects I introduced in the Art History 100 survey (enrollment 150-160 students) in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015. The same survey class I taught in Fall 2013 that did not feature the use of TBL in the sections was used as a control.

Overview of Two Team Projects and Results

Two team projects were introduced over the course of Fall 2014 and repeated in Fall 2015. To make sure every team member was carrying his or her weight and not freeloading off the others, the students were given the opportunity to evaluate the contributions of the members of their teams after each project was completed, first in hard copy and then later through the program I Peer. The first team project "The Power of the Physical Object," built off of a museum paper assigned the first month of class. For this earlier museum paper, each student had to compare two works from a list of five pairs at a local museum, producing first a written formal analysis and comparison of each example and then building on that analysis for their written interpretation of the works' expressive content and messages. The required field trip to the museum has been a longstanding feature of the course, and considered a highlight by the students, but the quality of the resulting papers tended to be uneven.

Part of the aim of the first team project was to make the skills necessary for success on the paper more explicit and to introduce a social component to that individual writing exercise. The project asked the students, working in their assigned teams to decide together which single object of the ten assigned for the paper they thought projected the most powerful physical presence when seen face-to-face. This generated a good deal of debate. Once each team agreed on their selection, they had to determine why this was, focusing on which aspects contributing to that power were less visible or less obvious in a digital photograph. A third step was to figure out how to present a compelling argument for their chosen work to their discussion section in five minutes, which involved further collaborating, prioritizing, and synthesizing.

The skills students had to develop in this first TBL assignment still involved visual analysis, but that analysis was broken down into its component skills, namely: 1) close looking, 2) tallying of visual observations, 3) prioritizing and synthesizing those observations to arrive at a compelling thesis about the work, 4) assessing and honing the thesis, and 5) presenting the thesis with its supporting visual evidence. The same steps were involved in the individual visual analysis papers and these first TBL projects. In the latter, there were both the additional social aspect of teamwork and the public presentation component, when the team had to convince other students in their section of their argument about the power of the object they had chosen.

Preliminary results were promising. While the museum papers averaged a B+, almost all of these TBL assignments fell in the A to A- range. The social aspect clearly helped; the students did better working in a team. But this first TBL assignment also revealed one

pitfall; some teams carved up parts of their project, assigning these to individual team members and bypassing certain steps of team discussion, collaboration, prioritizing, and synthesis. This piecemeal approach resulted in some presentations that were repetitive and lacked cohesion. In 2014, for the second TBL project (and for both TBL projects in 2015), stress was thus laid on the importance of students collaborating on the final product and really thinking through each element of the argument and presentation together as a team.

The second TBL project, assigned in the last month of class, built on the comparisons the students had been doing on the class tests, in the museum paper, and in the first TBL project. Students had to first select for comparison two works of art or architecture, one Islamic and one Renaissance, from a list of works they had learned about in class. Here, they had more freedom than in the first TBL project, and creativity was further encouraged. Each team could select any pair they liked (so they were not given set pairs as in the first assignment), which required discussion and debate within each team. The team then had to determine their thesis or argument about the message, power, and impact of each work and how the two fit together, then work on developing the parts of their argument as a team. Once again, the final challenge was to decide how to present their mini-exhibit to the class in five minutes and then execute that presentation. For that last piece, they were asked to consider a broad audience of their peers who might know nothing about the works, rather than simply the students in their sections (as in their first TBL project).[9] The pedagogical goal was to explore the higher levels of cognition in Bloom's pyramid, allowing the students both greater creativity and the opportunity for more evaluation and analysis. An additional benefit was that the project prompted students to begin preparing for a final exam that covered many of the same Islamic and Renaissance monuments.

Learning Outcomes: Grades and Student Evaluations

For the last quarter-century that I have taught this survey, the average grade on the final exam has invariably dipped from the midterm, traditionally the high point of test scores in the class. But in 2014, the grades on the final exam stayed at the same level as the midterm, and in 2015, the final exam grade improved a full two percentage points.[10] I attribute this improvement to the second TBL assignment, which helped students begin to review, assess, and evaluate the material featured on the final exam. To be sure, many of

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[9] For the second TBL exercise, students were graded not only on the content, but also on their oral delivery, for which I developed a handout of tips to help them become better presenters.

[10] 2014 average midterm exam grade: 86; average final: 86.36; 2015: midterm: 85.2; final: 87.2.

the pairings were fairly obvious ones, like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Duomo in Florence, the Florentine Church of San Lorenzo and the Mosque of Cordoba, Florence's Palazzo Medici in Florence and Granada's Alhambra; for the most part, the student teams did fine on these. Others, however, came up with comparisons far beyond what the TAs and I expected, with ingenious pairings such as Donatello's *David* and a tilework *mihrab* from Iran now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or Masaccio's fresco of the *Trinity* in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence and a mosque lamp from fourteenth-century Egypt. Taking the assignment to heart, these teams synthesized, for those who knew nothing about the Italian Renaissance or Islam, how such features as linear perspective and Renaissance iconography on one hand, and beautifully worked translucent glass with the enameled verses of the Koran on its surface on the other each conveyed cultural and religious values of their respective societies.

Both team projects helped students to practice how to look more closely, how to make more (and richer) visual observations, how to prioritize and synthesize those observations to arrive at a compelling thesis about the works, how to support that thesis with visual evidence, and both encouraged them to exhibit some creativity in the process. The presentations showed that they learned an impressive amount. The students' comments on the course evaluations were also telling. In 2013, before TBL was introduced, at least 25% of the students' (optional) written comments complained about the discussion sections. A number wanted the discussions eliminated entirely, while others called for more quizzes to better prepare for the major tests, more participation and hands-on experiences, and more opportunities for in-depth analysis and creativity with less stress on memorization.[11] In 2014, only 14% of the student evaluations commented on the sections. Half of these wrote positively about the teamwork and wanted more of it. The remaining suggested some modifications to the TBL approach (more time for assignments, more review, possibility to switch teams). Perhaps most telling of all, in response to a separate question asking students to assess the impact of TBL on their learning in the class, they gave it a 4.1/5.[12]

There is a lot more to be done, to be sure.[13] These preliminary results, however, suggest

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[11] 32/111 evaluations submitted for this class of 156 (a 71% response rate). The overall rating of the class that year was 3.8/5; overall rating of instructor was 4.4/5; and class participation was rated 3.5/5.

[12] 11/75 evaluations from class of 122 (61% return rate). The overall rating of the class also went up to 4.1/5, that of the instructor to 4.6/5, and class participation got a 4.2/5. The numbers in 2015 were similar, albeit marred by a low response rate (only 67 evaluations returned from a class of 149, or 45%). Class rating overall was 4/5, instructor 4.6/5, and participation 4.3/5.

[13] Future areas to address are: more focus on the synthesis piece (prioritizing information) and

that a skills-based approach combining team–based learning with the traditional art history lecture has much to offer students at the survey level. Art historians are increasingly called upon to include assessment in their classes but are understandably wary of it, fearing a substantial investment of time with poor or little in the way of concrete results. Incremental steps such as using Bloom's taxonomy and TBL can help.

carving out time after the presentation of the projects to ask students to evaluate strengths and weaknesses. Writing and diction are other areas where many of them could also improve.

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