

Teaching students to write about art

Results of a four-year patchwork text project



Eugène Carrière, 1849-1906, Man Writing (Detroit Institute of Arts)

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Who's used or heard of Patchwork Text before?

1 - Never heard of it

2 - Heard of it, but not used it

3 - Used it and didn't like it

4 - Used it and liked it

What's wrong with the essay? *(According to Richard Winter)*

First, it has to be undertaken at the end of the course, when only a few weeks remain before the assignment deadline ... So, lacking sufficient time, [students] panic.

Second, given this postponement of the writing task, teaching staff only become aware of students who are having difficulties when time is short - a problem frequently made worse because such students often keep a low profile and hope for the best.

Third, in order to maximise the time available to do the essay, students focus on earlier topics in the course and attendance at later sessions drops off precisely when the overall structure of course content may start to become clearer.

Fourth, the essay requires a specific style of writing, and, for many students, this style is difficult and alien, especially those returning to formal learning after a substantial break and those who are first-generation participants in higher education.

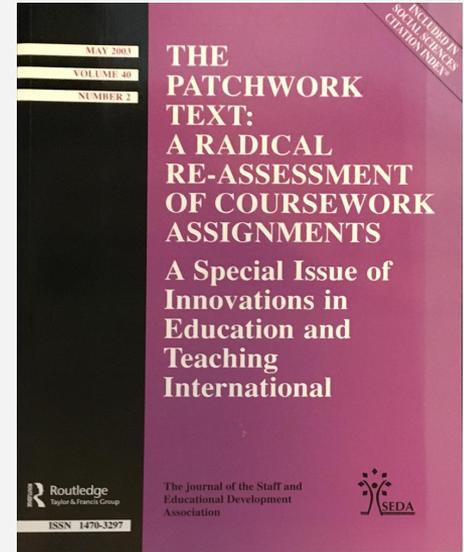
Finally, the essay requires the student to adopt the (essentially unrealistic) stance of one who has now, after just a few weeks' teaching, "mastered" a new topic. The essay presents learning as an authoritative "product", rather than the gradual process by which new learning is assimilated, through reading, discussion and personal reflection.



Winter, R. (2003), Alternative to the essay. *The Guardian*, Tue, 10 June.

What is a patchwork text?

“The essence of a patchwork is that it consists of a variety of small sections, each of which is complete in itself, and that the overall unity of these component sections, although planned in advance, is finalised retrospectively, when they are ‘stitched together’. Thus, a ‘patchwork text’ assignment is one that is gradually assembled during the course of a phase of teaching and consists of a sequence of fairly short pieces of writing, which are designed to be as varied as possible and to cover the educational objectives of the teaching. [...] At the end of the course, students add a reflexive commentary to the short pieces they have already written, which they may also, if they wish, revise and edit.”



Winter, R. (2003),
'Contextualising the patchwork
text', *Innovations in Education
and Teaching International*, 40:2,
pp. 112–22.

Outline of the project

At the beginning of the 2013/2014 academic year, a 2000-word essay in two Level 5 Fine Art modules and a 1500-word essay in a Level 4 module were each replaced with a PTA. The 2000-word PTA comprised eight entries of 250 words each. The 1500-word PTA comprised seven entries, each approximately 200 words in length. In all cases the learning outcomes being assessed remained the same, as did the final summative deadline (individual entries were fully editable until the final deadline).

Students were invited to give their responses to the PTA approximately two weeks after receiving grades and feedback for the PTA via an optional, anonymous online questionnaire that included a number of fixed-response questions and a single free-text field for further comments.

Responses: quantitative = 92 (23% response rate); qualitative = 60 (15% response rate).

Main findings

The five key findings from this study are that:

- students found the PTA challenging;
- students enjoyed the PTA;
- the PTA made the writing process more manageable;
- the PTA helped students to improve their subject knowledge; and
- the PTA helped students to improve their study skills.

Main findings: comments from students (1)

- “The limited word count ... [of each patch] is a great way to encourage a broad understanding of the subject(s). The process of summarising a topic and ‘making vey word count’ can be demanding, but it is not without rewards.”
- “I found it quite a challenge to only write two hundred words on each topic. ... However I am glad the first assignment was in this style. It was less daunting than trying to put together a longer essay.”
- “It was difficult but it was wonderful being able to write in this way for my assignment.”

Main findings: comments from students (2)

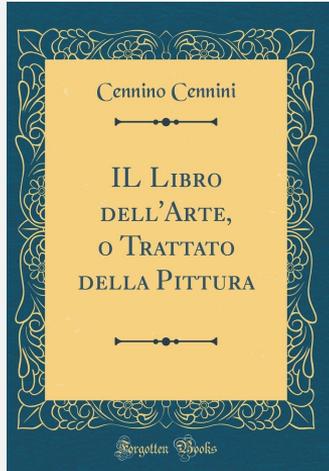
- “It trained me to think, research and write on a regular basis every week.”
- “This was a great introduction to writing at degree level and kept my thoughts on the subject and my writing skills sharp.”
- “It was a positive tool to motivate to write continually throughout the course, rather than leaving research to a later date.”
- This system is brilliant, as it's short entries that are manageable ... [and] it relieves the pressure and stress of a huge essay.

Challenges of teaching theory to ‘makers’



- making vs writing
- getting on with the business of what matters
- what it all might mean...

Challenges of teaching theory to ‘makers’



Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro Dell'Arte*
(*The Craftsman's Handbook*) (1390s)

stunted trees of the Riganmā series and this process of evolution easily presupposes a considerable time.

Thus the conspicuous dissimilarity between these two series of illustrations cited above leaves us no doubt about an earlier date than ca. A.D. 1600 for the Kala Bhawan Riganmā series. In any case, the Riganmā should be earlier than A.D. 1583, the date of the above-mentioned Sangrahaṇī Sūtra. Therefore, a date ca. A.D. 1275 may be justifiable.

Thus the Riganmā series presents a true early stage of the Rajasthani paintings, in primitive form, showing some definite characteristics to prove its existence during the sixteenth century. These manuscript illustrations leave no doubt about its pre-Akbari period and its independent origin, and thus help to settle the controversy.

ANAND KISHNA

“THE SIX LAWS AND HOW TO READ THEM”

Special interest has been aroused by Akker's new rendering of the famous Six Laws of Hsüeh Ho. Since acceptance of his interpretation would force us to regard all previous renderings as more or less obsolete, and since this interpretation appears to be meeting such acceptance from many people concerned with Chinese art, it requires some careful consideration. The Six Laws have been translated and discussed by numerous other writers; the first two were treated at length by Alexander Soper.¹ Soper's exposition still seems to me

¹Akker, W. C., *From Peking and Peking to the Six Laws*, which appear in the introductory remarks to Hsüeh Ho's *Art and Craft* (in: *Law fifth century*); and Introduction, pp. XIV–XLIII, for Akker's discussion of them.

²*The First Two Laws of Hsüeh Ho*, *Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 8 (1960), pp. 419–423.

generally the soundest of all that have appeared to date, and I shall depend on it somewhat in the following discussion.

Hsüeh Ho, after announcing that “painting has Six Laws,” and himself provides the answer (necessarily, since they are his own invention), presenting them in order. The form of his presentation, as it has customarily been construed, is as follows (taking the first law as example): 一、氣韻生動。Adopting Soper's translation to the order of the Chinese sentence, this law could be rendered (awkwardly) as: “The first, ‘animation through spirit consonance’ is this.” Chang Yen-yüan, quoting the laws in *Li-tai MHC*, simplified Hsüeh's construction to the form: 一、氣韻生動。或曰：氣韻生動，或曰：氣韻生動。or, “The first is called ‘animation through spirit consonance.’” However presented, the Six Laws have been taken as four-character phrases by Chinese, Japanese, and Occidental scholars ever since.

Akker believes that all these scholars, beginning with Chang Yen-yüan, have been in error, and that each of the Six Laws consists, properly speaking, of a single two-character compound, with a second compound or two-character phrase following it and explaining or defining it. He punctuates the first law, for example: “一、氣韻。生動。氣韻。生動” and translates, “First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality” (pp. XXIII, 4). The other five he renders in similar form. The words *shih yeh* are thus understood as equating the law and its definition, and the numerals preceding each law as belonging properly only to the law itself, which comprises only the first two characters of the four. Akker quotes the

¹I do not find very convincing Akker's suggestion that Hsüeh Ho may have been quoting the laws from an earlier source; there is no real reason to suppose that they were other than original with him.

James F. Cahill, ‘The Six Laws and How to Read Them,’ *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 4 (1961), pp. 372–381

Challenges of teaching theory to ‘makers’



- writing as practice
- as knowledge accrues, so does a body of words
- rhythms and routines

Could PTA work for your students?

Questions

- Do you have assessments that you might like to move to PTA?
- What benefits can you see to using PTA?
- What concerns do you have about adopting PTA?

In your breakout group, discuss these questions and add your thoughts/comments to this padlet:

- https://uon1.padlet.org/robert_farmer3/pta

Benefits and limitations of PTA from an academic staff perspective

- aggregative rather than ‘all or nothing’
- writing as an iterative, incremental process
- developing a critical and meaningful purchase with the task at hand
- ensuring criticality, cognisance of debates and and scholarship...
- opportunity for more expansive approaches to writing provided in other written assignments

More information



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