

**Final Report of Art History and Visual Culture Studies Pedagogical Improvement Grant:
“Reimagining the Art History and Visual Culture Studies Introductory Course”**

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Overview: The PIG grant allowed all four contributing instructors to ARTH 103 (Intro. to Art History and Visual Culture Studies) to discuss the course in-depth and as a department for the first time in the 12 years I have been at Whitman. The four of us met 6 times between early-June and mid-July. These discussions were far-ranging and extremely productive. They also occurred in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the protests against structural racism that followed the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department. While these events were not the focus of our discussions, they nevertheless influenced our exchange and will influence how the course is taught going forward.

Our project began with the three following goals:

1. How can the Introductory course better expose students to key questions and histories of the discipline?
2. How can the Introductory class better serve as a gateway to the Art History and Visual Culture Studies major in the face of declining enrollments?
3. How can the Introductory course both compliment and fill in curricular gaps created by changes to the First Year Experience and General Education distribution requirements?

Did recipients complete what they set out to complete?

Yes. And *tbd*. In our grant request, we wrote the following: “Successful completion of the grant will result in a new shared syllabus for ARTH 103 - *Introduction to AHVCS* to be used by all four contributing faculty members...We will also explore “building our own canon” in this course, so that students have a set of terms and images that we all teach. This more expansive, inclusive canon will better utilize our respective areas of expertise, including Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, and Race and Ethnic Studies.” After initial discussions, we concluded that we wanted to share key core readings in the discipline, while also maintaining the freedom to include content relevant to our own research interests and backgrounds. We decided that what was initially a source of concern (the difference in content across the different sections) was instead an area of strength we want to build upon. To that end, **we focused on three main areas: drafting a revised set of learning goals; collaborating on a shared bibliography to be continuously revisited, expanded and revised; collaborating on a new course title and shared description with a land acknowledgement to be used in the course catalogue and on all of our syllabi.** We believe all three of these changes will address our first and second goals of exposing students to key questions and histories of the discipline and clarifying student understanding of our

disciplinary methodologies. Whether or not this help the class serve as a gateway to the major remains to be seen. In the future, we will conduct formal (course assessments) and informal (in-person discussions with students) to determine to what extent the new format encourages students to major (or not) with AHVCS.

An additional idea that came from our discussions is the inclusion of an object from the college's collections to be discussed and analyzed through the various methodological approaches we emphasize in all of our sections. We believe this will add consistency to our respective approaches, emphasize the value of "understanding our location," expand the scope of the class beyond a Eurocentric, High Art canon, and "interrogate the possibilities and limits of these [same] categories" (see description below). For example, a class might begin with discussion of a sculpture from the collection and discussed in terms of its formal properties. After units on iconography, semiotics, or postcolonialism, we would return to the same object to asks students how these methodologies might create new understandings and interpretations different from where we started. Unfortunately, this aspect has had to be postponed because of the need to shift to a hybrid or all-online teaching model for Fall 2020 but we hope to begin in Spring or Fall 2021.

Our third goal was simply too ambitious for the current moment. We will need to learn more about how FYE unfolds over the next few years and how our individual contributions to it can better help us navigate the new campus-wide learning goals.

What are the products of their efforts in terms of content, format, and public dissemination?

New Course Title and Description—Art History and Visual Culture Studies: A Critical Introduction: *This course is a critical introduction to the discipline of art history and the study of visual culture. We will consider how the study of visual culture emerged in response to four categories that have been at the center of art history as a discipline: the object, the artist, the viewer, and the institution. Examining a range of works outside and within the Western European canon, dating from antiquity to the present day, we will interrogate the possibilities and limits of these categories. Our goal will be to 1) understand how social power has manifested through the idea, production, and circulation of "art" and forms of visual culture more broadly, and 2) practice reading, writing, discussion, and sustained looking in relation to the visual field. Short papers, presentations, and/or exams are required. This course is required for the art history and visual culture studies and studio art majors and minors. Closed to juniors and seniors.*

The Department of Art History and Visual Culture Studies acknowledges that we teach on the traditional lands of the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla tribes, who were forcibly removed by the treaty of 1855 and are affected by ongoing practices of settler colonialism.

New Shared Learning Goals:

1. Understand how social power has manifested through the idea, production, and circulation of “art” and forms of visual culture more broadly.
2. Practice reading, writing, discussion, and sustained looking in relation to the visual field.

New Thematic Units:

The course will now be organized around four concepts: *object*, *artist*, *viewer*, *institution*. These terms will serve as units throughout the semester. Readings will be organized about how they address each category. For example, we all agreed to use Amelia Jones’s essay “Every Man Knows Where and How Beauty Gives Him Pleasure: Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics.” The essay critiques the racial and gendered dynamics at work in the concept of “beauty.” By revisiting Kant, Hegel, and recent arts criticism that deploys traditional categories of beauty, the author demonstrates how seemingly stable aesthetic labels are blind to their own power of exclusion, alienation and even racism. This reading would be appropriate for any of the four categories but would likely be used for “object” or “viewer.” Another reading, Partha Mitter’s “Collapsing Certainties: Reflections on the End of the History of Art” addresses how the reproduction of a Eurocentric canon in Western art history reinforces outmoded cultural hierarchies and points to new ways of incorporating non-European, non-canonical texts into course curricula. This reading could be used in either the “artist” or “institution” sections.

Shared Bibliography:

The department will collaborate on a shared bibliography to be continuously revisited, expanded and revised. This bibliography will supplement the shorter bibliography of core shared readings. Our early discussions about models for shared bibliographies focused on a document produced by the History of Art Department at the University of Edinburgh entitled “Diversifying Art History: A Collective Bibliography,” which can be linked to [here](#). We plan to use this as a template for our own document.

Do any of these have potential long-term positive effects on the curriculum or academic program more generally?

As a department, we have always been conscientious about the role of race, class, gender, and power in our classes. However, this summer pushed us to resolve to include even more of the voices of feminist scholars and scholars of color in our curriculum. We believe this is important for its own sake. We also think it will benefit the content of our courses, as well as efforts across campus to diversify the curriculum and to foreground those issues of inequity, prejudice, racism in all its forms that the college has pledged to address.

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

The project was necessarily limited by the remote exchange of our discussions. As the primary author of this document, I speak for myself here. I am fortunate to work in a department where

we all genuinely like and respect one another. However, much of the humor, generosity, and energy of our in-person exchanges was lost over Zoom and Google Meet. Nevertheless, I believe that any occasion for us to discuss the content of our courses, shared pedagogies, and what we value about teaching not only benefits us as individuals, but our students and the college as well. Despite the difficult conditions, we were able to focus on the introductory course and come up with significant changes that reflect our shared commitments and individual interests.