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Preparing Our Students for the Professional World: Integrating Thematic Assignments and Teamwork into the Art History Survey Course Design

Leda Cempellin
South Dakota State University, USA

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Abstract

Art and design students in higher education often prioritize design skills over written communication. With the opportunity to restructure courses around increased asynchronous flexibility arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the author of this manuscript (who is also the course instructor) has developed a hybrid-blended course design in the art history survey class for over three years. This design guides students toward developing teamwork skills that are crucial in the professional world. While offering tools for art history assignments, this exploratory research encourages humanities scholars to rethink their role in shaping the 21st-century professional. A model of course redesign, including its successes and limitations, is discussed.

Teamwork and Communication in Higher Education: Skills for the Real World

Teamwork's role in addressing workplace complexity—through shared expertise and interconnected productivity—has increasingly gained recognition. According to John Condia and Golnaz Sadri (2015), teamwork enhances leadership, self-assessment, organizational commitment, efficiency, flexibility, and problem-solving (p. 14). Teamwork involves various communication skills, including active listening, conflict resolution, negotiation strategies, openness to diverse opinions, initiative, and feedback (Condia & Sadri, 2015). Organizations aiming for flexibility, creativity, and competitiveness often adopt "self-managing teams," where teams, rather than managers, are responsible for the project (Wageman, 1997, p. 49). In 2000, Elizabeth Dunne and Mike Rawlins discovered that teamwork in classrooms promotes broader and deeper learning: team members merge expertise to build a superior product; proficient students become mentors by modeling various strategies; interdependencies motivate students to improve time management and communication (p. 363). Hence, teamwork is progressively introduced in higher education classrooms—particularly in non-humanities disciplines—to prepare students to tackle professional complexities by learning to work effectively with others.

Healthcare education widely incorporates teamwork. Effective team communication in healthcare leads to positive outcomes: in nursing classrooms, teamwork projects involve topic selection, goal envisioning, activity and team roles' structuring, motivation, and progress monitoring (Yi, 2016). In advanced biochemistry and molecular biology classes, teams engage in problem-solving through experiment design and data analysis (Murthy et al., 2014). In collaborative sports like basketball, cooperative learning is introduced to foster "team spirit," which requires putting the team's interests ahead of one's own (Dawei, 2019, p. 21). Academic mathematicians use teamwork for "collective communication design work" to convey innovative approaches to students (Austin et al., 2020, p. 296). Accreditation boards in electrical and computer engineering require students to learn teamwork communication skills, leading to cross-disciplinary collaborations between engineering and communication faculty (Kendrowicz et al., 2006).

Claiming the Role of Art History in Forming Tomorrow's Professionals

What is the role of the humanities in shaping future professionals? The humanities' empathic strength is increasingly recognized in STEM and health curricula. The medicine faculty at the University of Ottawa introduced a new course module, "The Humanities in Health Care," focused on artistic exploration, historical perspectives on illness, ethical issues, and professionalism, the latter aimed at building connections among students, patients, and other members of the health care team (Hall et al., 2014, p. 520). With the exception of the long tradition of communication faculty teaming up with STEM disciplines, the humanities' role in

professional preparation has been overlooked, contributing to their perceived decline in higher education.

Michael Bérubé's 2003 article "The Utility of the Arts and Humanities" underscores the unpreparedness of the arts and humanities for an era where technology redefines "our sense of what it means to be human" (p.23) and questions "our cultural values" (p.24):

> Most of the university affiliated artists and humanists I know are profoundly ambivalent about the idea of justifying their disciplines in terms of their social utility; they tend to regard self-justification as a dubious enterprise best left to the writers of admissions brochures and back-patting liberal-arts mission statements […]. By contrast, scientists are relatively unconflicted about defending their disciplines in terms of social utility, even when they reach for *their* bromides, which usually have to do with humankind's unquenchable thirst to know and explore. (Bérubé, 2003, p. 25)

At the intersection between the humanities and the arts, art history's pedagogical approaches leverage the empathic nature of the discipline in contextually examining the maker's human condition and/or the artifact's subject matter. Jari Martikainen (2017) has contextualized the emergence of practices exploring the empathic dimension of art history within the broader critique of power structures underlying the dominant narrative. Practices like making, performing, and curating images are increasingly introduced in the classrooms to leverage the empathic components of the discipline. Kate Joranson (2023) describes a novel post-pandemic use of empathy by introducing "curated browsing sessions" (p.3), enabling students to experience chance discoveries and have an "embodied experience of browsing that is an often-overlooked part of research" (p.4). Other empathy-leveraging approaches involve recreating art through performative practices and role play (Foutch, 2017), emphasizing the artistic "creative process" over content (Meloche & Katz-Buonincontro, 2018), and using digital mapping to enhance student perception of parallel rather than sequential temporalities (Bruzelius & Jacobs, 2017).

The conversation has recently shifted towards action learning models. In 2017, Laetitia La Follette introduced Bloom's Taxonomy to model team-based active learning techniques in the survey classroom. The highest levels, namely "analyze," "evaluate," and "create," were correlated to the tasks of analyzing, comparing-contrasting, and forming an argument (pp. 5–6). This action-based approach shares some principles with the thematic assignment developed by this manuscript's author.

The 2020 COVID pandemic revealed the need for flexible hybrid-blended courses, prompting the author to rethink the art history thematic paper assignment and integrate it into the survey

course redesign by developing team-based learning strategies. Despite art history's reputation as an individual enterprise, the positive correlation between emotional intelligence and team performance (Suwandana, 2019), coupled with the empathy inherent in art-history inquiry, suggests that teamwork is feasible in this discipline.

Thinking Thematically and Forming a Teamwork Strategy for the Art History Paper

A thematic approach to the art history paper bridges the creative arts and the history-based disciplines, thus catering to students from various majors, including those unfamiliar with the discipline. Having students choose a broad theme associated with the human condition or experience (such as love, war, sickness, birth, death, etc.) enables them to better relate the discipline to their own personal life experiences. Balancing the creative approach of applying human themes to artworks from different eras and cultures with the analytical thought needed for contextualization presents a number of complexities.

Studies highlight how increasing Internet usage is linked to decreasing literacy, as the quest for immediacy, simplicity, and brevity erodes attention span and vocabulary (Varga, 2020). The rapid pace of data acquisition pressures students to digest vast amounts of information, hindering the development of analysis, evaluation, and communication skills. The unpreparedness among art and design majors has reached alarming levels, challenging the integration of discipline-specific content with scaffolding activities.

Art history as a discipline engages its stakeholders primarily in art discourse, making reading and writing skills essential. If art historians completely erase writing assignments and leave the content transmission entirely to multiple-answer testing, art history loses its foundational skills and core *raison d'être*. Julia A. Sienkewicz highlighted this issue:

> As we consider a possible future where faculty positions are threatened by increasing automation of teaching and learning, reconfiguring the outcomes of our core classes emphasizes that their primary value does not lie in the sphere of memorized factual knowledge but rather in the modes of thought cultivated in our students—a type of learning much more tied to the individual faculty–student mentorship and the peer-to-peer learning of a class (in person or online) than to automated quizzes and computer-scored writing. (Sienkewicz, 2016, para. 4)

Teamwork helps students focus on one paper area, learn new communication skills when integrating each other's work, capitalize on diverse abilities, and learn from each other throughout the process. A 2021 study found that team members need complementary skills, decision-making empowerment, fair division of responsibilities, and they must grow in mutual trust (Rajae et al., 2021).

To create an efficient teamwork model embedded in a discipline, the instructor must reflect on fragmenting a complex assignment—like an art history thematic paper—into smaller steps. The instructor also needs to consider the skills needed for each step and guide students toward recognizing and sharing those skills.

The art history paper is a web of connections (*Figure 1*): object-to-artist, object-to-document, object-to-another object, object-to-place, object-to-time, object-to-cultural norms, etc. There are many possible structures for a paper, depending on the explored relationships to answer a research question. Each of these connections can potentially be interdependent with many others, making an art history paper challenging to divide into clear-cut assignment portions.

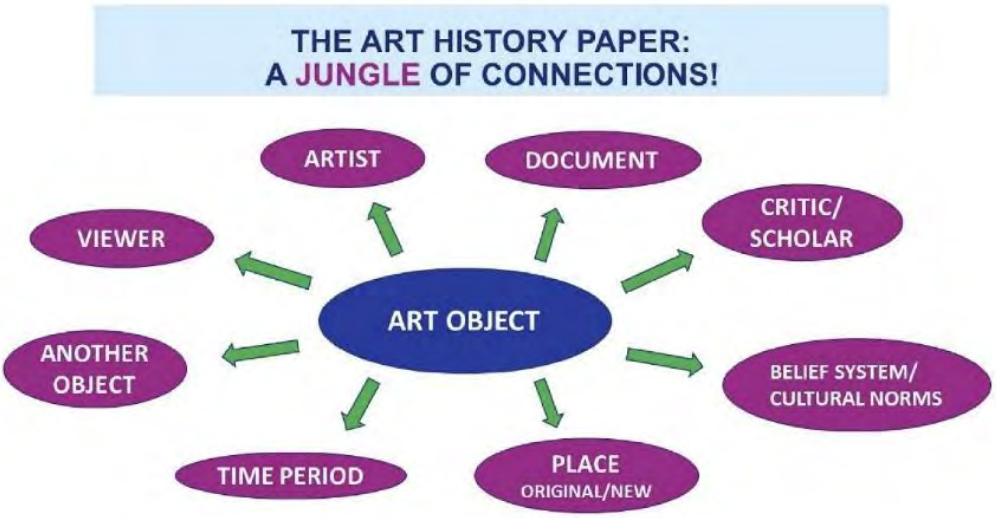


Figure 1. Some of the Interconnectivities in Art History (Content).

To build high-performing and motivated teams, the course instructor broke the assignment into phases and devised roles for each of them (*Figure 2*). The complex paper assignment requires students to perform an artwork's visual analysis (implicating what is immediately perceptible, like color, mass, texture, space, and so on), to rebuild its cultural context (which is not overt, therefore requiring research and critical thinking), to find other artworks sharing a human condition (for instance, sickness, friendship, love, death, etc.), and compare those works while preserving a balance between their thematic relations and unique circumstances.

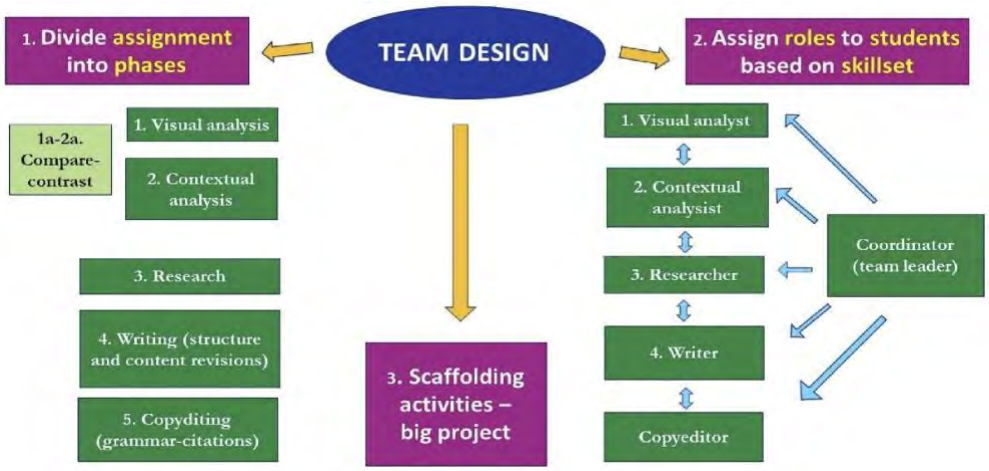


Figure 2. Team Design in the Art History Thematic Paper (Process).

The selection of additional artworks and their comparison to the other works already chosen requires a search for sources to build the conceptual framework and the activation of critical thinking and questioning skills (the "researcher" role). After students submit their research, the narrative is restructured for cohesion, and any research or content gaps are addressed (the "writer" role). The last steps consist of grammatical and style revisions, including proper citations (the "editor" role). A team coordinator oversees the project, facilitating communication among team members, keeping the group organized by building internal deadlines, and ensuring accountability.

Forming teams presents a significant challenge for the course instructor. The author has tried both random selection and a more systematic approach. Letting students choose their teams is discouraged as it could create perceived inequality between groups whose members are friends and others whose members would have to work with students they do not know. A random selection better mirrors the professional world, where students must work with anyone.

Table 1

Team role questionnaire for student self-assessment

	SKILL	CORRESPONDING ROLE
1.	I am a very organized person.	COORDINATOR
2.	I consider myself an extrovert and communicative person.	COORDINATOR
3.	I am patient and I like to make sure that everybody is on the same page.	COORDINATOR
4.	I like being a spokesperson.	COORDINATOR
5.	I am very experienced identifying visual elements and design principles and articulate how they work together to make meaning.	VISUAL ANALYST
6.	I am observant and curious.	VISUAL ANALYST / CONTEXTUAL ANALYST
7.	I like to interrogate an artwork, read and reconstruct its cultural context.	CONTEXTUAL ANALYST
8.	I have experience searching for and evaluating the quality of sources of information.	RESEARCHER
9.	I like or have experience reading complex texts and extract meaning.	RESEARCHER
10.	I have experience with academic/research papers.	RESEARCHER
11.	I have good writing skills.	WRITER
12.	I like or have experience reordering texts for cohesion.	WRITER
13.	I have the patience and curiosity to re-read texts, ask questions, identify content issues - ex. lack of some important information - that need further attention.	WRITER
14.	I have experience with citations and references in academic writing.	EDITOR
15.	I can see when the sentence contains a bad paraphrase or needs an in-text citation.	WRITER / EDITOR
16.	I am very patient and detail-oriented, even with the most tedious details.	EDITOR

Over the years, the author has tried various group formation strategies. Initially, randomly assigning students to groups through name extraction resulted in skillset imbalances, with several teams being dysfunctional. More recently, the author has developed a questionnaire for students to self-assess their skills prior to forming the teams (See **Table 1**). This true–false survey can guide students' self-assessment of their skills related to specific team roles in art history thematic papers.

Table 2

Assigning students to teams

TEAMS and ASSIGNED ROLES							
	Coordinator	Visual Analyst	Contextual Analyst	Researcher	Writer	Editor	NOTES [ex. secondary strengths to help the team]
GROUP 1							
GROUP 2							
GROUP 3							
GROUP 4							
GROUP 5							
GROUP 6							

The results from **Table 1** allow course instructors to outline potential roles for students, which can be visually organized in **Table 2**. This table combines student self-assessment from the questionnaire and faculty assessment of student performance during the first weeks' scaffolding activities. Early assignments gauge visual analysis, contextual analysis, and research skills. The structure of writing (writer role) and attention to detail (editorial role) are intrinsic parts of these assignments. The coordinator role can be intuitively assessed by observing active participation and initiative in class discussions.

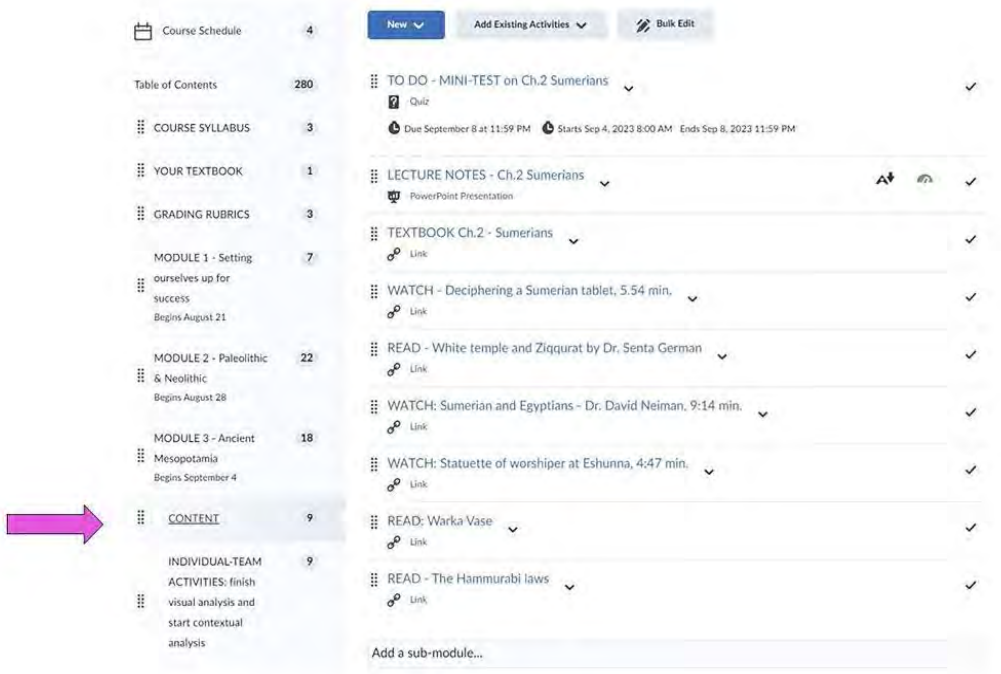
Learning Role-Empathy Through Scaffolding in Course Redesign

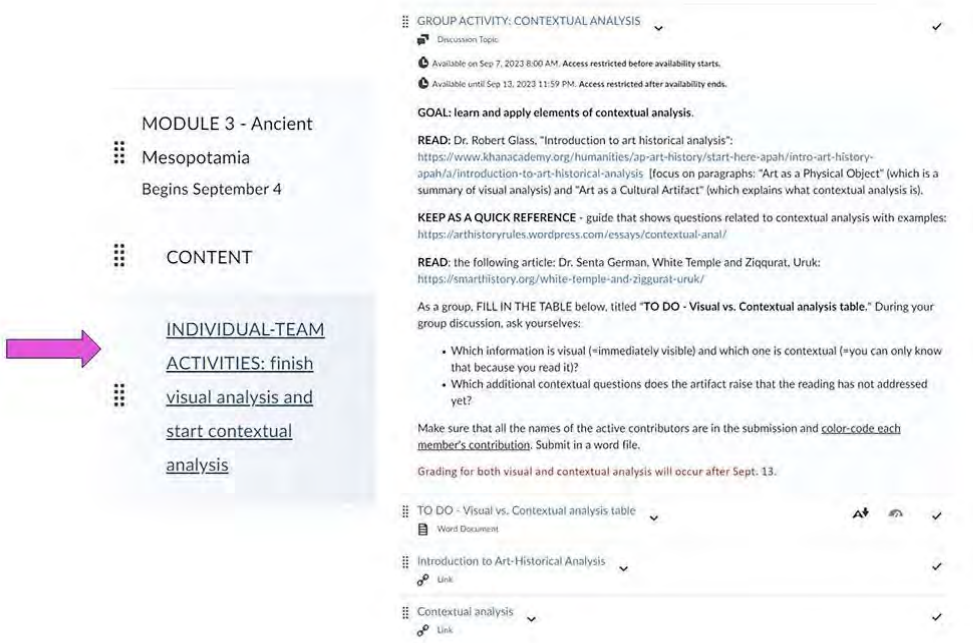
One of the greatest challenges of teamwork is motivation. Studies show a gap between potential and actual team performance when low motivation erodes productivity (Hütter & Diehl, 2011). Terms like "free riding" or "social loafing" describe situations where some team members exploit a shared reward system (such as the same grade being awarded to all team members) and do not pull their weight. This can demotivate proficient students, who feel demoralized by less proficient team members. Hence, "Motivation and thus the effort exerted in a task depend on the way individual contributions are combined into a group product" (Hütter & Diehl, 2011, p. 846). This issue necessitates robust pedagogy in deconstructing the assignment to understand its nature, its components, and the skills needed for each part.

It is crucial to find and test strategies to help students understand that authentic teamwork is not the work of one on behalf of everybody and that writing is not optional in art history classes. The faculty noticed this mindset during the initial group work phases: the visual and contextual analysis was sent by the team analysts as bulleted points to panicked student

researchers, who had to figure out how to build a cohesive narrative from vague fragments. This observation triggered an experiment in subsequent semesters: moving all group work to the semester's later part and using the first half to prepare the class for group work through smaller scaffolding assignments that engaged all students in some of the work involved in each role. Understanding how other roles operate and what they need to function helps team members deliver better content. Student engagement and motivation increase when the students understand the process and can effectively communicate with each other. In the course's most recent iteration in Fall 2023, the instructor led teams to work together from the first week to learn all these phases as a team. How the individual and group components of this scaffolding process are specifically designed to help individuals merge into teams largely depends on the faculty's teaching experience.

The author divided the course into weekly modules. Since the class meets twice a week, the modules are subdivided into two submodules that start synchronously in class and are completed by students asynchronously at home: one is called CONTENT and the other INDIVIDUAL–TEAM ACTIVITIES (*Figures 3a and 3b*).





Figures 3a and 3b. Example of CONTENT (Chronos) Submodule And INDIVIDUAL–TEAM ACTIVITIES (Kairos) Submodule.

In the week's first class (see *Figure 3a*), lecture-based content is synchronously transmitted in the classroom through lectures and video discussions. Students then reinforce content asynchronously from their remote locations through lecture notes, accessing additional open-source documents to further expand their knowledge base, and tests to assess their understanding. This part opens on Monday morning and concludes on Friday evening, providing students ample time to schedule their asynchronous homework. Given that the course goal is world art history in ancient cultures (from Prehistory to the late Middle Ages), the course instructor shares with the students that the ancient Greeks called this time *Chronos*, which is time in terms of quantity, like minutes and hours, and the time it takes for us to complete tasks, etc. This time is very familiar to us and indeed represents the most traditional part of course design.

In the week's second meeting (see *Figure 3b*), the class changes rhythm and enters *Kairos*, which, according to the ancient Greeks, is a sense of time stretching beyond the confines of minutes and is, therefore intended in qualitative terms. It is an opportunity to expand on the subject matter of that week (for instance, the White Temple and Ziqqurat at Uruk during the week dedicated to the Sumerian civilization) and to apply this content to a specific phase of group work as part of a much larger assignment. This also allows the art historian to shape the humanities class in a studio environment format that is more familiar to art and design students, where they are actively engaged, and the professor walks around the room, checking if they have any questions or encounter any challenges or asking a team to summarize the concept they are working on. The instructor can critically engage with student content under development by modeling a questioning behavior.

This course has been redesigned to integrate and balance two different time concepts defined by John E. Smith in quantitative and qualitative terms (Smith, 1969). The two submodules of the course follow a different rhythm. The "content" submodule runs from Monday to Friday, following the weekly professional schedule. The "individual–team activities" submodule runs from midweek to midweek across two modules, allowing students with hectic weekly schedules to reflect on the demanding writing-based assignment and teamwork over the weekend. Having two rhythms to handle can seem quite challenging to students when the course starts, but the repetitive structure of the weekly modules helps to build a semester-long habit. Additionally, the instructor creates a Zoom-generated video that explains the weekly modules' structure and rationale, shared with students during the first week of class and available as a reference source throughout the semester.

Simple Word documents and tables are excellent tools for guiding students' visualization of the progressive steps planned by the course instructor for an assignment. A table (**Table 3**) helps students categorize what is immediately seen (visual analysis) versus the information

they had to look up in the assigned reading (contextual analysis). Students can also add questions on aspects of the visual and contextual analysis that can potentially move them in the research area. If this table is assigned to individual students—as in the case of team roles largely assigned by the faculty—it will immediately show the student's strengths to the course instructor, and this information can help fill in **Table 2.** If this table is assigned as teamwork (like in the most recent iteration of the course in Fall 2023), students can color-code their contributions. This table can further expand as the assignment becomes more complex (**Table 4**).

Table 3

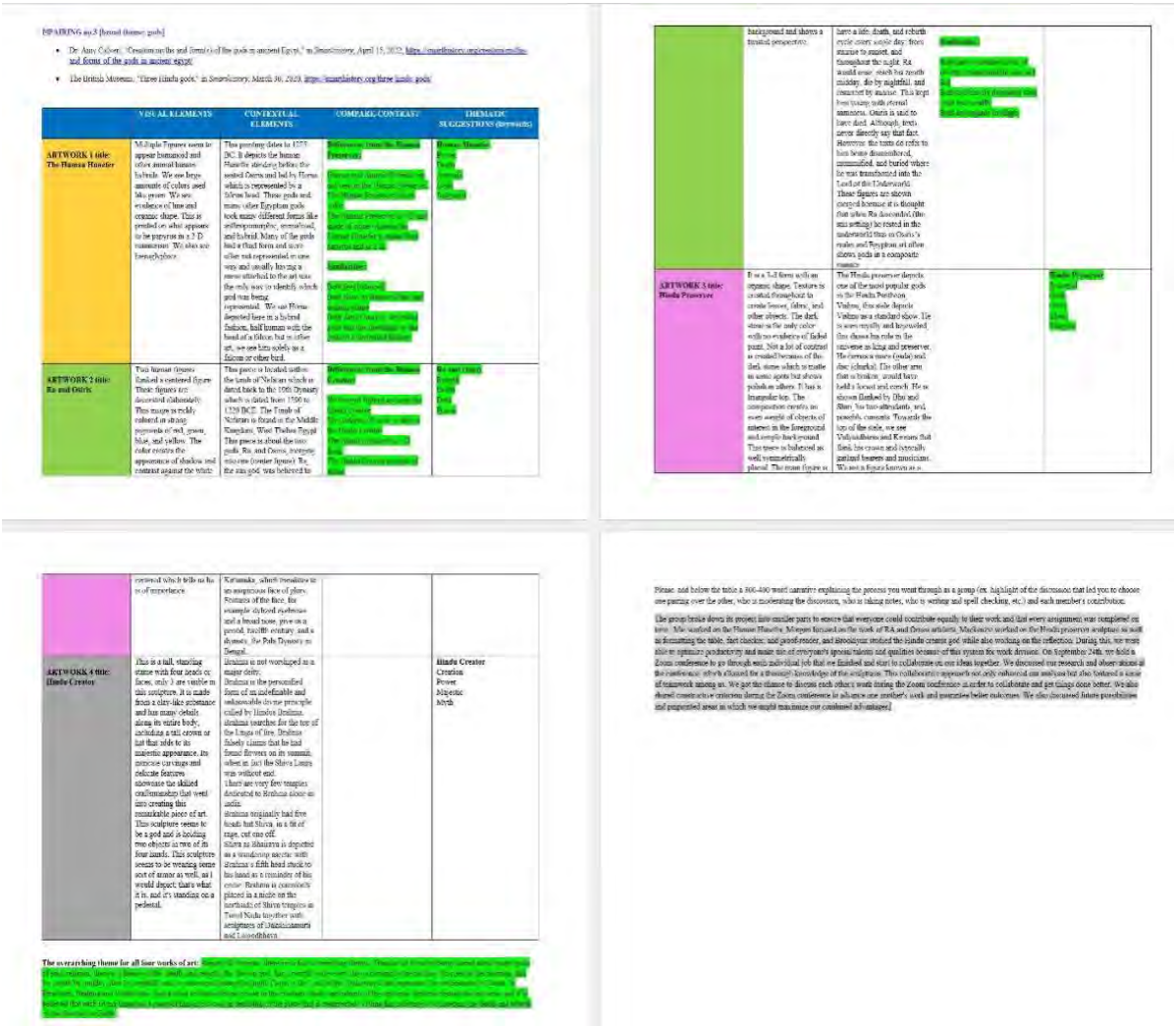
Table for the contextual analysis assignment: Sample outcome from Group 5 (with students' permission)

Reference: Dr. Senta German, "White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015: https://smarthistory.org/white-temple-and-ziggurat-uruk/

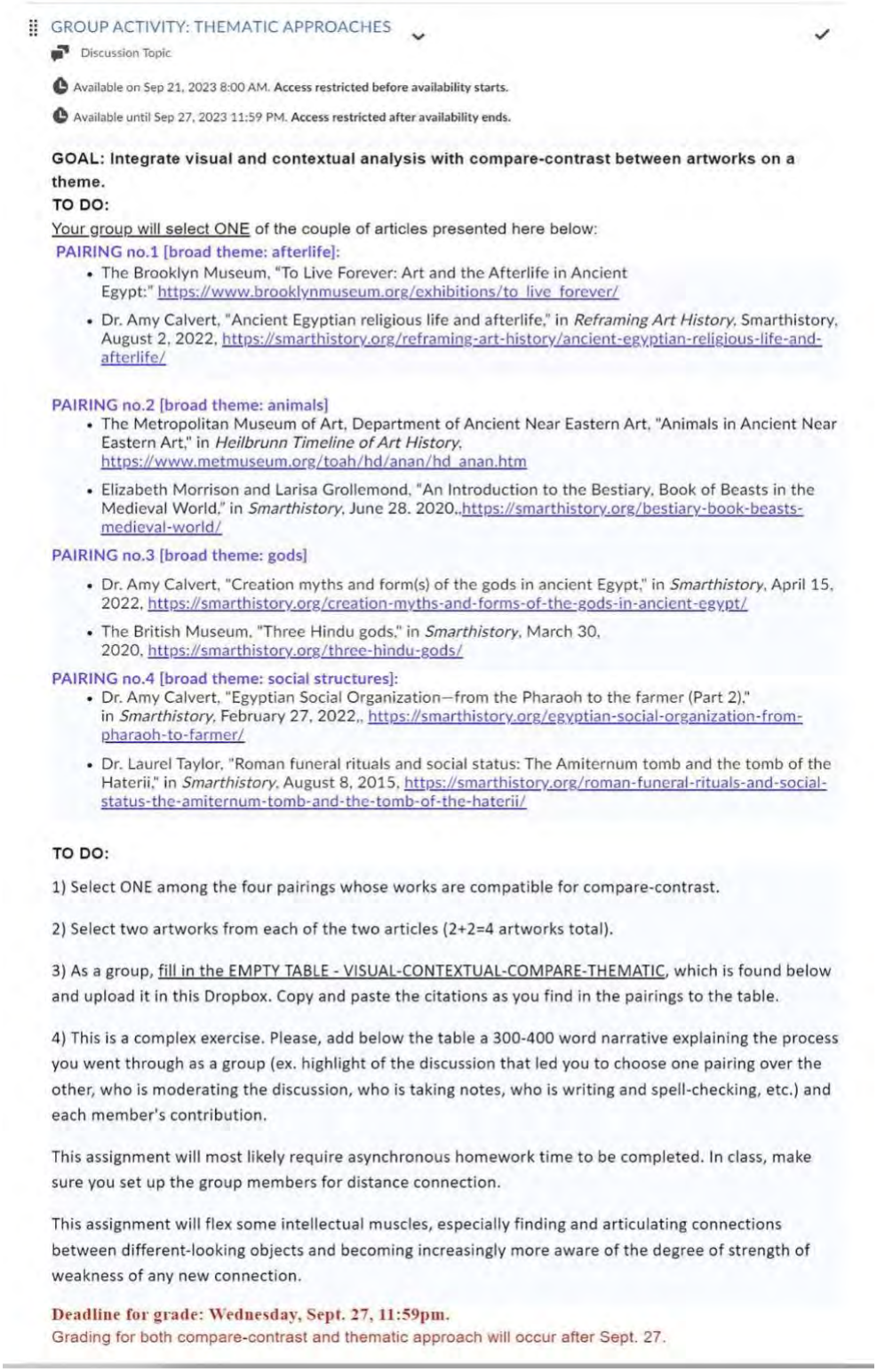
VISUAL ANALYSIS	CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS
It is tall	Dated from the 4th millennium B.C.E.
QUESTION: Why was it visible from a great distance?	Visible from a great distance
This is an excavated site	QUESTION: When was it excavated?
There are shapes cut out of the walls of the building (model)	Dedicated to sky god Anu
Has three entrances none facing the ziggurat ramp	QUESTION: Why aren't they facing the ramp?
Different shape cutouts on walls	QUESTION: Why are there different-shaped cutouts?
Sides of the ziggurat were very broad and sloping	Made completely of mud bricks
White Temple is rectangular	Would have taken 1500 laborers, working 10 hours a day, for 5 years to build the last revetment
Wall remnants in a square shape can be seen (real)	Flat top of the ziggurat was coated with asphalt and overlaid in brick
It covers a large area	It is dedicated to a god or goddess honored there
There is black striping at the top of the temple (model)	Gets its name because it was completely white-washed inside and out
Square wall remnants look to have been underground (real)	QUESTION: Why is it fully white-washed?
There are rectangular indentations on the sides of the ziggurat (model)	QUESTION: Why was it made?
There is not much vegetation surrounding the ziggurat remains (real)	QUESTION: Why weren't there more windows or cutouts for light?
The Temple is built on top of the Anu Ziggurat	QUESTION: Why was the sky god Anu so important? What was their reasoning for making a Temple to worship him?
There is a large terrace that surrounds the Temple	QUESTION: Did this terrace serve as a place to gather? Was it used for celebrations?
There is a pit in the center of one of the terraces	This pit has remnants of fire meaning the space could have been used for gatherings/celebrations or even sacrifices.
There are no decorations, artwork, or statues shown in the digital reconstruction of the Temple	QUESTION: Was this how that actual Temple was? Could there have been monuments of the sky god Anu inside?
QUESTION: What symbols were on the tablets?	19 gypsum tablets used for temple accounting were found in the temple
There are small rectangular and triangular cutouts in the sides of the Temple	QUESTION: Were these cutouts used as windows to give the temple airflow? Why did they choose to make the top ones a different shape?
The Temple's roof is not flat.	QUESTION: Could there have been a way up to the roof? If so, what was it used for?

Table 4

Thematic brainstorming tool for students: Sample outcome from Group 8 (with students' permission)



The assignment in *Figure 4* is given to students during the most complex phase immediately preceding their thematic paper brainstorming. The assignment requires students to choose one of the themes, look at the two articles pertaining to the theme (which introduces the research component and role), select two artworks for each theme, and compare and contrast them. It can be shaped in multiple ways, for instance, by giving students links to browse and extract themes on their own, or pre-forming thematic arrangements (like in this case).



GROUP ACTIVITY: THEMATIC APPROACHES

Discussion Topic

Available on Sep 21, 2023 8:00 AM. **Access restricted before availability starts.**

Available until Sep 27, 2023 11:59 PM. **Access restricted after availability ends.**

GOAL: Integrate visual and contextual analysis with compare-contrast between artworks on a theme.

TO DO:

Your group will select ONE of the couple of articles presented here below:

PAIRING no.1 [broad theme: afterlife]:

- The Brooklyn Museum, "To Live Forever: Art and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt:" https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/to_live_forever/
- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Ancient Egyptian religious life and afterlife," in *Reframing Art History*, Smarthistory, August 2, 2022, https://smarthistory.org/reframing-art-history/ancient-egyptian-religious-life-and-afterlife/

PAIRING no.2 [broad theme: animals]

- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, "Animals in Ancient Near Eastern Art," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/anan/hd_anan.htm
- Elizabeth Morrison and Larisa Grollemond, "An Introduction to the Bestiary, Book of Beasts in the Medieval World," in *Smarthistory*, June 28. 2020.,https://smarthistory.org/bestiary-book-beasts-medieval-world/

PAIRING no.3 [broad theme: gods]

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Creation myths and form(s) of the gods in ancient Egypt," in *Smarthistory*, April 15, 2022, https://smarthistory.org/creation-myths-and-forms-of-the-gods-in-ancient-egypt/
- The British Museum, "Three Hindu gods," in *Smarthistory*, March 30, 2020, https://smarthistory.org/three-hindu-gods/

PAIRING no.4 [broad theme: social structures]:

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Egyptian Social Organization—from the Pharaoh to the farmer (Part 2)," in *Smarthistory*, February 27, 2022,, https://smarthistory.org/egyptian-social-organization-from-pharaoh-to-farmer/
- Dr. Laurel Taylor, "Roman funeral rituals and social status: The Amiternum tomb and the tomb of the Haterii," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/roman-funeral-rituals-and-social-status-the-amiternum-tomb-and-the-tomb-of-the-haterii/

TO DO:

1) Select ONE among the four pairings whose works are compatible for compare-contrast.

2) Select two artworks from each of the two articles (2+2=4 artworks total).

3) As a group, fill in the EMPTY TABLE - VISUAL-CONTEXTUAL-COMPARE-THEMATIC, which is found below and upload it in this Dropbox. Copy and paste the citations as you find in the pairings to the table.

4) This is a complex exercise. Please, add below the table a 300-400 word narrative explaining the process you went through as a group (ex. highlight of the discussion that led you to choose one pairing over the other, who is moderating the discussion, who is taking notes, who is writing and spell-checking, etc.) and each member's contribution.

This assignment will most likely require asynchronous homework time to be completed. In class, make sure you set up the group members for distance connection.

This assignment will flex some intellectual muscles, especially finding and articulating connections between different-looking objects and becoming increasingly more aware of the degree of strength of weakness of any new connection.

Deadline for grade: Wednesday, Sept. 27, 11:59pm.

Grading for both compare-contrast and thematic approach will occur after Sept. 27.

Figure 4. Sample of Thematic Brainstorming Assignment.

As shown in **Table 4**, students are required to identify visual and contextual elements for all four chosen artworks from the two articles, compare and contrast the works amongst each other, and look at possible subthemes related to the major theme that was already assigned to them. At this point, most, if not all, of the six roles previously identified (visual analysis, contextual analyst, researcher, writer, editor, and coordinator) are active in some form, especially given that students are required to translate the table into a corresponding narrative. This complex assignment paves the way for the teams to choose a theme representing the human condition and walk through the same steps in developing their own paper in the following weeks. This group chose one of four pairings given, which was originally classified under the broad theme of "gods." From the meticulous details of the visual and contextual analysis to the left, the team moved towards extracting meaning in a more succinct way to the right, thus using the table for brainstorming and direction. Besides the original theme assigned by the instructor to the pairing, this team has started to see other ramifications connected with the idea of "power" and "death and rebirth," which at times appear as keywords and, at other times, start to emerge in the analysis narratives. The next step that students can do to use this table is to start thinking about how the concept is expressed in these pieces. For instance, they can think if there is a dynamic between humans, or between humans and animals, or if these are standing-alone statues.

Student Success Week and A New Grade Paradigm: Preparing Students to Refocus Towards Team Success

An important ingredient in forming high-performing, highly motivated, and self-regulated teams in the classroom is the grading system to build individual accountability and ensure student engagement and motivation throughout the semester. Thinking about the distinctions made by Carol S. Dweck (2006) between "fixed mindset" and "growth mindset", the course instructor has devised and introduced a new grade paradigm which is explained to students in the course syllabus (*Figure 5*).

IMPORTANT NOTE on the course grading structure and goals (=organization and motivation).	GRADING SYSTEM: D2L builds your final average grade by progressively adding each small grade portion from each assignment. D2L does not calculate the average course grade, and I do not do that as well (if you wish, you can try in multiples of 20, but it will take considerable time).	RATIONALE: Knowing an average grade too early before the end tends to demotivate us: the risk is thinking to have an A and stopping to work on the course. Not knowing keeps us motivated throughout the course by focusing on learning, as opposed to grades. Exams are not made up on demand (with exception of documentation of prolonged absence impairing work like a serious illness, see attendance policy). Generally, forgetting or missing one assignment does not seriously impact a grade composed of many small increments like this course: however, seeing a 0 under that assignment helps identify an organizational issue and work towards improvement. Basically, the grade system is designed to help us focus on learning as a process and on developing and maintaining good learning habits (=growth process in the short and long terms), as opposed to merely focusing on grade rewards (=immediate results that are transitory).

Figure 5. Explanation of the Grading Scheme in the Course Syllabus.

In past pre-COVID course iterations, having 4–5 higher-stakes grades per semester led to complacency among students who scored an A early on. Since the course builds on previous content, it becomes challenging, and a C after two A grades impacts the final grade and student morale, triggering requests for assignment make-ups. This encourages a fixed mindset focused on grades rather than on learning as a growth process. Recent APLU reports found that teamwork is perceived as more important to alumni, employers, and faculty than to students (Crawford et al., 2011). After graduation, the focus shifts from individual achievements to the organization's welfare (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Therefore, well-planned teamwork assignments in the classroom should facilitate this transition.

Breaking the course grade into numerous small grades eliminates any sense of grade average: with a total course grade of 1,650 points and 30–32 assignments in a given semester, extracting an average becomes quite challenging. The coveted A grade only appears towards the last week before finals, encouraging students to trust in the process while seeking small weekly performance confirmations.

If students comply with the weekly instructions, the grade will likely be closer to an A. The iterative grade reinforces the active students' performance weekly, indicating they are learning and on track. When dealing with an unfamiliar discipline, regular training (as opposed to last-minute large assignments) builds a solid discipline. When a student misses a small-stakes assignment, an automatic 0 acts like a 'diagnostic' test that can be used to initiate a conversation between faculty and students on self-management progress. A fixed mindset may cause panic among students due to the erroneous association of a 0 in an assignment with failing an entire course. The instructor reassures them that up to two zeroes will not turn an A average into a B. Mistakes are fine if the student identifies the issue and takes corrective action.

This new grade paradigm motivates students to stay engaged, monitor progress, learn from small missteps, and trust that their efforts will pay off. Students shift from the fixed mindset of "I am an A student" towards the growth mindset of "this is what I have learned in this course." Their focus on grades shifts to performance. The potential for failure is embedded within a safe, educational environment, giving students room to make mistakes and learn from them. This type of grading system embeds resilience through small failures as part of the growth process.

Conclusion: Successes and Limitations

In this course, the iterative design ensures that all team papers meet citation requirements ranging from acceptable to excellent. The content is more robust than individual contributions in courses prior to this restructuring, with well-functioning teams often producing exceptional work.

In Fall 2020 and Fall 2022, the instructor collected feedback by adding one customized question to the IDEA survey of faculty and course: *What/Which skills have you honed in this course and how?*[1] The results (*Figure 6*) suggest a shift from emphasizing communication (a teamwork skill) to recognizing processes related to art history, such as visual and contextual analysis, research, and writing. This suggests an improved balance and integration between content and team activities in recent course iterations.

Figure 6. Data Extrapolated by IDEA Survey, Fall 2020 and Fall 2022.

However, challenges arose with forming teams of six to seven students and assigning specific roles. When a student for any reason was unable to perform an assigned role during the allocated days, other team members had to step in, making reassignment of that student to a different task challenging. Some students suggested smaller groups for better management. In

[1] Data collection from the IDEA survey has been approved by the Center for the Enhancement for Teaching and Learning through an IRB exemption umbrella protocol, approval 09/18/2020.

fall 2023, the instructor tried smaller groups of 3-4 students, asking students to explain their self-regulatory processes as part of some assignments.

Other crucial components of the course redesign, like the thematic process breakdown for art history and the grading system, have achieved their purpose and remain largely unchanged. The dynamic between the course instructor as guide on the side and increasingly more self-regulating teams will continue to evolve, following the finding by Ruth Wageman (1997) that team design (which includes a clear goal, diverse team members' skillset, and interdependence) has a greater impact on self-management than direct coaching.

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About the Author

Dr. Leda Cempellin (PhD Università degli Studi di Parma, Italy) is a Professor of Art History, the inaugural Associate Director of the School of Design, and the Coordinator of the Museum Studies minor at South Dakota State University. Her interdisciplinary research in late modern Art History focuses on the influence of collaborative practices on individual and artistic identities. She authored the first US monograph on the world-renowned artist Daniel Spoerri: The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri (Vernon Press, 2017). Her latest collaborative endeavors in pedagogy and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) strive to capture broader transitional phases. These include the post-Covid era in Museum Studies and the opportunities and challenges that arise from incorporating Artificial Intelligence Art History education. Alongside Dr. Pat Crawford, she recently co-edited the anthology, Museum Studies for a Post-Pandemic World (Routledge 2024).

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