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Scaffolding the Formal Analysis Assignment in Art History Courses to Promote Learning

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Abstract: This article provides a discussion on how to promote self-regulated learning by employing scaffolding assignments using the learning management system (LMS) Canvas. With many college courses transitioning to the online environment, students are expected to complete large, complex assignments that meet higher order learning outcomes. Challenges of the online course include allowing for faculty–student interaction and the lack of real-time guidance for these complex projects. A way to increase student success, as research has shown, is to scaffold assignments—that is, create smaller assignments that build toward a larger, more complex assignment. Scaffolding not only allows students the opportunity to practice skills they need to develop but also gives faculty the opportunity to provide feedback to enhance learning. I explain how I adapted the standard formal analysis assignment from an introductory art history course into a series of smaller assignments using the Canvas LMS. By creating assignments that ask students to address select aspects of the larger task, I give students the means by which to repeatedly practice their visual analysis (and writing) skills as well as the opportunity for frequent instructional feedback, both recognized as best practices in teaching and learning. Quantitative evidence supports this practice and suggests student learning and success have improved.

Keywords: scaffolding, online learning, feedback, Canvas, art history, formal analysis.

With many college courses transitioning to the online environment, students are expected to complete large, complex assignments that meet higher order learning outcomes. Common challenges of the online course are allowing for faculty–student interaction and the lack of real-time guidance for these complex projects. A way to combat these challenges and increase student success, as research has shown, is to scaffold assignments—that is, create smaller assignments that build toward a larger, more complex assignment. Ambrose et al. (2010) have reiterated that assignments with instructional scaffolding provide students structure and practice, which in turn "helps students practice the target skills at an appropriate level of challenge" (p. 132). This, of course, relates to Vygotsky's (1930/1978) zone of proximal development, which proposes the importance of determining the area (zone) between what a student can accomplish unaided and what that same student can accomplish with assistance. Thus, when instructors recognize that students have difficulty performing a certain task, scaffolding not only gives students the opportunity to practice skills they need to develop but also gives faculty the opportunity to give feedback to enhance learning. In addition, scaffolding in an online course enables students to have more interaction with the instructor as well as the material. What follows is a discussion of how I adapted a common assignment in the field of art history into a series of smaller assignments to promote learning. I explain how to utilize the Canvas learning management system to create these assignments and offer suggestions on how to implement scaffolded assignments in other disciplines and contexts.

The Impetus to Scaffold

In 2016, I began teaching FINA A102 in an online environment. This is an introductory art history course that covers the renaissance period to modern art movements of the mid-20th century. Aside from student comprehension of artists, artworks, and the contexts of art making, the main goal when teaching this course is developing their ability to see visual art and be able to analyze and understand how these objects communicate. This goal is practiced and achieved primarily in what is known as a formal analysis, a writing assignment that asks students to articulate what an art object communicates by describing and analyzing its visual form. This is a skill that is especially pertinent not only for art history but also for understanding and navigating our image-saturated world. In the formal analysis, my expectation is that students compose a two- to three-page written analysis of visual form (line, color, space, composition, contrast, texture, shape, technique) of a single work of art and determine how those elements are placed to convey meaning and content. This is a foundational assignment, at the root of more advanced discourse in art history, yet it is also a complex task for those not familiar with *looking closely at art* and using art historical vernacular to describe it. To complicate matters, it is not always useful, necessary, or appropriate to discuss all aspects of form when writing a formal analysis. A work that is a monochrome drawing, for example, may not merit a discussion of color, yet often students would approach the formal analysis akin to a laundry list that needed to be checked off without understanding that they did not need to address them all. Such a mentality will generate poor analyses and poorly developed looking skills. Whereas these problems have always existed for students in a traditional classroom, they became more pronounced in the online environment as it became clear that students needed both more guidance and more practice.

Scaffolded Assignments

A solution to both the laundry-list analysis and vague discussion of the individual formal elements revealed itself in the form of scaffolding. In 2017, I added three assignments to the course to assist students with writing their final analysis of a painting. By completing assignments that ask them to address select aspects of the larger task, students have the opportunity for repeated practice in their visual analysis (and writing) skills as well as the opportunity for frequent instructional feedback, both of which are recognized best practices in teaching and learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kulik & Kulik, 1988; Lamburg, 1980).

To begin, students select a work from a predetermined set of images that I as the instructor have identified as applicable to the parameters of the assignments. For example, a student could select *Jetty and wharf at Trouville* (1863) by Eugène Boudin (Figure 1) because of their personal interest in the work or scene represented. When students have the opportunity to select an artwork that interests them, they are motivated to look carefully at the artwork and complete the assignments. When scaffolding assignments, this motivation is necessary to sustain students' completion of the desired assessments.

Figure 1. Eugène Boudin, ***Jetty and wharf at Touville, 1863.*** Oil on Canvas, 34.8 × 58 cm. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Open domain.

In the first assignment, students discuss the use of color. Students were instructed to do this with specificity, which means, identifying colors by name and indicating their saturation, intensity, and hue; identifying where specific colors are located relative to others within the work; recognizing how color is utilized across the work to move the eye; and considering how color conveys meaning. These requirements were laid out in the Canvas assignment instructions and criteria for evaluation were detailed in a rubric (Table 1).

Table 1. Grading rubric for formal analysis Part I: Color.

Criteria	**Grading rubric**			
	Excellent (5 points)	**Good (4–3 points)**	**Minimal (2-1 points)**	**Poor (0 points)**
Color is discussed with specificity (specific color, saturation, intensity, hue)	Colors are referred to with specific detail	Colors are mostly referred to with detail	Color discussed is vague	Not discussed
Colors are discussed with respect to location	Color and location fully and specifically discussed	Color and location mostly discussed	Color and location barely discussed	Not discussed
Colors are discussed in relation to how they move the eye.	Full discussion	Mostly full discussion; could be elaborated on	Barely discussed	Not discussed
How color conveys meaning	Full and thoughtful consideration, supported by visual evidence	Mostly full consideration, mostly supported by visual evidence	Barely considered and/or not supported by visual evidence	Not discussed

For example, a novice student submits the following discussion of Figure 1 for this assignment:

> *In Eugène Boudin's,* Jetty and wharf at Touville *(1863), there are a lot of muted and cool colors. There are people in red, brown and white and a black and white dog. The colors in the painting convey calmness.*

This answer is poor as it does not discuss specific color in the first sentence, does not identify specific color locations in the second sentence, does not address how color moves the viewer's eye through the work, and does not utilize specific visual support for the asserted meaning. To provide specific and timely feedback, the rubric in Table 1 details the criteria by which quantitative scores were determined. However, the grading function (Speedgrader) in Canvas was utilized to provide specific narrative feedback on the student's submission, such as, "Look closely at this work, what specific colors do you see that are muted? What cool colors do you specifically see? Blues? Greens? Where are they located?" and to address absent elements of the assignment, asking, "Do you see any colors that are repeated in the painting? Where is it located and where does that make you look?" The student is thus provided the opportunity for self-regulated learning and ample time to review feedback. In conjunction with the grading rubric, Speedgrader assures the instructor is providing appropriate feedback to the correct student. There is little room for grading error by the instructor, which in turn allows the student to quickly return to the original source material for further observation and analysis and revision of their assignment. The pertinent section of the final paper (revised submission) thus reads more akin to the following:

> *In Eugène Boudin's,* Jetty and Wharf at Touville *(1863), there is a field of muted brown in the foreground to create a wharf. Highly saturated blues and greens create the sea on the left and right side of the central Jetty, and light blue and white create the sky, which seems somewhat ominous with dark gray clouds at the top. On the right-hand side is a woman wearing bright red which leads the eye to another woman wearing red in the center of the painting. Above her is a blue, white, and red flag, which draws the eye down the crowded jetty to two more small specks of bright red. This use of the color red draws attention to the large amount of people congregated at this place and suggests an important event is taking place.*

This response is much more specific and demonstrates the student's close observation of the work. Some of the observations could be even more detailed, yet it is a meaningful improvement from the first iteration as it addresses specific colors, location of color, and how color is utilized to draw the viewer into the painting.

The second scaffolded assignment implemented focuses specifically on the artist's use of lines in the painting—implied line, lines of direction, and how meaning is generated through line. The third assignment focuses on composition, or the way that all the elements are arranged. Specific items students are asked to discuss include where specific figures/objects are located, if their arrangement is balanced or asymmetrical, and whether the arrangement of elements conveys a shallow or deep visual field. Each assignment was submitted 2–3 weeks after the initial assignment, which enabled the instructor to submit constructive narrative feedback (within 48 hr of the due date) and allowed students the ability to review these comments and, ideally, revise their submission before working on the next step.

Inherent in this scaffolding process is the requirement for students to return to and look repeatedly at the material (in this case, their chosen painting). This repeated practice, known as a best practice for student learning and retention (Brown et al., 2014), is contrary to how students today commonly engage with the visual. Interaction with images today often takes place in the form of quick

clicks, continuous scrolling, and pop-up windows on internet sites and social media. Similarly, when in museums or other art institutions, news sources such as the *New York Times* and *Artsy* have reported, the average person spends an average 15–30 s looking at an object, yet to truly understand a work of art (let alone anything else) requires much more time, analysis, and reflection (Kaplan, 2017; Rosenbloom, 2014).

Assessment and Analysis

As discussed above, each smaller assignment allows the instructor to give students specific and substantial feedback on how to develop their visual observation and descriptive skills. These three parts are revised and resubmitted in a single formal analysis assignment.

When assessing student performance on the final assignment, a rating of excellent indicates the student has provided a detailed and specific analysis of the formal elements and those elements were used to support a strong thesis statement. It also demonstrates that the student looked carefully at the object. A rating of good indicates that the student has composed a mostly detailed and specific analysis of the object; one or two points might need further clarification and specificity, but those elements are used in support of a thesis statement. Table 2 displays assessment data for the completed formal analysis from before scaffolding (and including the traditional, face-to-face courses, as the assignment was the same) and after adding the scaffolding assignments.

Table 2. Percentage (number) of students receiving formal analysis assessment scores before and after scaffolding assignments.

Final formal analysis assessment	Before scaffolding (Fall 2014–Fall 2016, $N = 127$)	After scaffolding (Spring 2017–Spring 2019, $N = 141$)
Excellent	54% (69)	69.5% (98)
Good	31% (39)	20.5% (29)
Minimal or poor	15% (19)	10% (14)

As this shows, a small, but meaningful improvement was seen in student performance. Qualitative feedback from end-of-course evaluations indicated that students appreciated this breakdown of the assignment, but some still wanted more guidance on how to convey more detail. Overall, the percentage of students earning an excellent or good score before the scaffolding assignments was 85%, which increased to 90% after scaffolding was deployed. The greatest difference occurred in the number of students earning excellent scores after the implementation of the scaffolding assignments—there was a 15% increase in student performance.

Learning Lessons

While scaffolding provides students the opportunity to practice self-regulated learning and successfully complete more complex assignments, the biggest challenge remains with the instructor—how to break a complex assignment down into parts that do not complicate the final assignment and continue to meet the broader learning outcome(s) it is designed to measure. First, to help isolate the number of scaffolded assignments and identify specific assignments necessary for other applications and disciplines, investigate past assignments and determine areas in which students consistently struggled to meet expectations. Some of this may be data driven and based on

overall assessment scores but some may be based on anecdotal evidence gathered from qualitative measures such as student evaluations of teaching and informal midterm surveys.

Second, it is necessary to develop clear grading rubrics for each assignment. Rubrics ensure that assignments are not only geared to developing students' ability to perform the specific skill/task but are also in alignment with the larger project goals. To this end, it is important to determine (and be willing to adjust over time) the point value(s) assigned to the scaffolded assignments, if any. This instructor noted that students do not complete assignments that do not impact their overall grade. In fact, it may be productive to place more value on the cumulative scaffolded assignments than the final project itself, as students typically put more effort into assignments that have a greater impact on their overall grade.

Third, instructors should become familiar with how the student views and interacts with the learning management system utilized by the university. Each platform, be it Blackboard, Sakai, Oncourse, Moodle, or Canvas, has a distinct user interface for faculty that is not necessarily the same as the student view. In Canvas, students are notified of their overall grades and any additional comments placed in the textbox, but they are required to log in and select "view rubric" and/or "view feedback" to see the actual rubric scores and narrative comments the instructor has added using the Speedgrader tool. Creating iterative and scaffolded assignments is futile if the student does not know where and how to access their feedback. To this end, implementing a logical order of scaffolding assignments and clear assessment practices affords students the opportunity to advance their mastery of discipline-specific skills and complete complex and higher order tasks.

In conclusion, it is important to assert that instructors should not expect to get this "right" the first time they implement scaffolded assignments in their courses. Considering the hurdles that need consideration—the particularities of the learning management system, the design and number of the assignments, and student engagement—there are many choices to be made, and not all are always successful. A reflection on and modification of assignment(s) based on student feedback and performance should be part of an instructor's process when implementing scaffolded assignments.

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