Teaching Strategies Showcase

Indiana University’s Teaching for Student Success

Module 3: Science of Learning

Title: Using Scaffolding for Larger/More Complex Assignments

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Location: IU Southeast

# Context for this strategy

In the field of art history, a standard assignment introduced in lower level courses is the formal analysis, that is the description and analysis of a work of art’s *form* and how that form conveys the *subject* of the work (what it represents) and creates *meaning.* This task is complex as it requires the novice to learn a new set of terms, develop one’s ability to recognize and identify those terms in a work of art, and finally, to be able to synthesize those observations to argue how those parts create the whole (subject and meaning).

In performing a formal analysis, there are many formal elements to consider and students often default to providing what essentially reads like a list (thus providing little to no argumentation) and lack a discussion of meaning. Or, students conduct research and provide others’ interpretations of the work and dismiss their own ability to analyze the visual.

In order to develop the lower order skills of formal observation and aid the development of the higher order formal analysis, I have implemented a series of assignments to scaffold (or support) the development of student’s visual analysis skills and the completion of a formal analysis paper.

# Materials needed to implement this strategy

All you need is time to develop the smaller assignments and rubrics.

# Step-by-step implementation

1. **Decide what the most essential tasks are of the larger assignment and the overall purpose.**

I decided (somewhat arbitrarily) that a successful formal analysis would address at least three of the formal elements of a work of art. By choosing three different elements, I believe students have enough material to craft a stronger argument about the work’s subject and meaning.

1. **Decide how the essential tasks can be applied across all students.**

For my assignment, students are able to select a work of art from a predetermined group of paintings provided by me and thus there is a potential for some of the formal elements to be harder to observe or absent (e.g. a monochrome painting). Thus I had to consider from which works of art students would be able to choose and how the scaffolded assignments would apply to all.

1. **Break the essential tasks into smaller assignments and create rubrics.**

I selected color, line, and composition as the three formal elements that students would investigate. For each assignment, I developed instructions which would guide students into a deeper observation of the artwork, and made available grading rubrics to indicate how students would be assessed.

1. **Stagger assignment due dates and provide feedback.**

In traditional semester-long courses, I have each formal analysis assignment due approximately every three-four weeks. I provide feedback via the grading rubric and with written comments in their document (using Speedgrader) to provide instruction on where to develop looking and writing skills.

1. **Synthesize – How to Achieve the final product**

Finally, I provide instruction to each student on how to take each part of the analysis and the feedback they received to create the final product—a formal analysis which communicates how the objects form conveys the subject and meaning.

# Student response to this strategy

As a result of this change, a small - but significant - improvement was seen in student performance as seen in the table below. Qualitative feedback indicates that students appreciate this breakdown of the assignment, but some still would like more feedback. Overall, students earning an excellent or good score before the scaffolding assignments was 85%, and after, 90%. Perhaps most significant is the number of students earning excellent scores after the added assignments - I saw a 15% increase in student performance.

| Formal analysis paper | Before Scaffolding Assignments (Fall 2014-Fall 2016) | With Scaffolding Assignments   (Spring 2017- Summer 2019) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Excellent | 54% of students (69) | 69.5% (98) |
| Good | 31% of students (39) | 20.5% (29) |
| Minimal or below | 15% of students (19) | 10% (14) |
|  | N=127 | N = 141 |