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“Picture after picture:” A mixed methods study of instructional practices in art history

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Abstract

Art history is a field in flux, especially in higher education. Recent international trends in literature have indicated changes in content and instructional methods. Due to a lack of empirical evidence, researchers of art history pedagogy rely on personal opinion and anecdotal evidence to form research problem statements. This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to understand what types of instructional methods are currently being used in art history classes. Results from quantitative observation and qualitative focus groups demonstrated that lecture was the most common teaching method. Additionally, data revealed emergent themes about student preference for certain teaching methods.

Aim

Art history, like many of the liberal arts, is experiencing changes as they attempt to respond to mounting calls for skill-based priorities in education. Despite a ‘luxury’ reputation, art history offers the opportunity to learn skills such as visual literacy, critical thinking, knowledge of history, global awareness, research skills, and creativity (Meloche & Katz-Buonincontro, 2018). As university art history instructors begin or continue to make changes to their pedagogical strategies, it is important for these changes to be based on quality, empirical studies in the field of art history education.

Problem

A review of the literature revealed that the majority of problem statements in art history education research refer to a few examples of published round table discussions (Phelan, et al., 2005) or opinion articles (Collins, 54, no 3, 1995). Researchers have also relied on personal opinion and anecdotal evidence (Spivey et al., 2015). This study seeks to address a gap in the literature by using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to describe how art history is currently being taught.

Research Questions

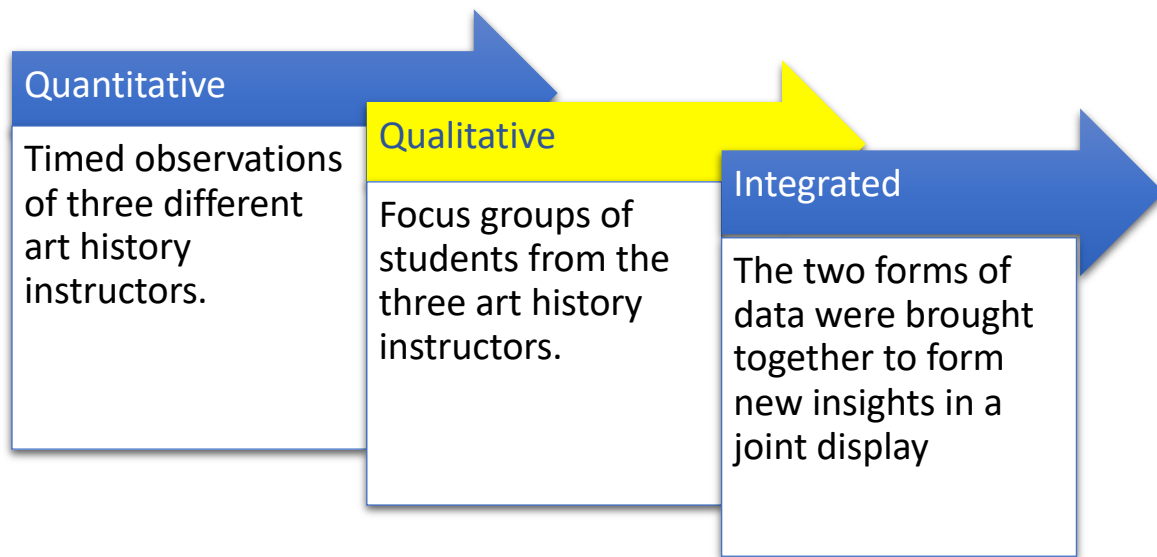
1. How much time do university art history instructors spend on different teaching methods?
2. What are student perceptions of art history instructional methods?
3. To what extent do the qualitative student perceptions confirm the data results from the quantitative observations of art history instructional methods?

Method

This study incorporated an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design data are collected at two points

during the study. First, quantitative data were collected and analyzed by the researcher who took observational notes in class, utilizing a timing software. The quantitative data consisted of the timed observation notes, which were analyzed using averages and basic descriptive statistics.

The results from the quantitative data were then used to make decisions regarding the qualitative collection methods. Finally, the two forms of data were brought together to form new insights in a joint display.



Research findings

The results from the quantitative observation indicate that lecture was the most common classroom method used by each instructor-participant.

Table 1 *Quantitative observation data results*

	Teaching Activity	Minutes
Averages	Housekeeping	$M=7.5$ $SD=1.9$
	Activity	$M=4.1$ $SD=3.5$
	Discussion	$M=18.3$ $SD=3.8$
	Lecture	$M=42.4$ $SD=13.1$

Selected focus group themes

- Focus group participant-representatives from each instructor confirmed that lecture was the most common method used by their art history instructors.
- It was common for participants to discuss feeling like the class involved too much lecture.

- Participants also expressed a desire for more activities, rather than lectures.

Selected joint display findings

- The joint display results confirm that activities are not frequently utilized as an instructor method in art history, however students expressed a preference for spending time on activities because the lecture could get fatiguing.
- Activities were mentioned in the focus group as a significant and memorable instruction method.
- A theme that arose was the student desire for a balance between lecture and activity methods.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study has demonstrated that the results of the quantitative observation data of art history teaching methods are convergent with the student perceptions. The quantitative observation method would be appropriate for assessing teaching methods in the future. The anecdotal theory that the lecture method is the most common teaching method of art history was empirically demonstrated. Although publications suggested that art history classes were incorporating activities (Gasper-Hulvat, 2017), data from the current study suggests that this trend is still emerging. Finally, the focus group discussion revealed additional themes that would make for impactful future studies. For example, students mentioned how art history helped them gain critical thinking skills that they used outside of class, increased their global awareness, and helped them understand the present.

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Alysha (Aly) Meloche is a second year PhD student in the School of Education. She has a Master's degree in art history from Temple University's Tyler School of Art. Her current research interests are the intersection of creativity and the aesthetic experience. She is a contributing editor for the Art History Teaching Resources website, serves as websecretary of AERA's Graduate Student Council, a member of the advisory board for Integrative Teaching International, and an editorial board member of EViE Graduate Student Journal.