

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title of Project: *Conceptual Thinking for AP Art Portfolios*
Year: 2014-2015
School/Grade: Byram Hills High School/9-12

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

We teach a variety of classes in the visual arts department at Byram Hills High School. This year we focused on our AP Photography, AP Graphic Design, and AP Studio classes with students in the 11th and 12th grade. The focus of our study was based upon the following rationale: Students in the AP level must submit a three-part portfolio in May for potential college credit which is based on their overall combined score from the three sections: Concentration, Breadth, and Quality. The Concentration section requires students to propose a theme and then create twelve artworks that demonstrate an exploration of this theme. According to the College Board, the Concentration section is a Sustained Investigation and "...a body of work that demonstrates a student's sustained thoughtful investigation of a specific visual idea...The concentration should grow out of the student's ideas and demonstrate growth and discovery through a number of conceptually related works." The challenge we have experienced is that students' concentration proposals were often simple, concrete, and lacked a personal connection.

Action Plan:

The question that we researched is "How can we foster AP students to think *conceptually* as they develop the Concentration section of their AP Portfolios. We define *conceptual themes* as themes that involve investigative thinking.

Our research took us to resources such as other high schools' web pages as well as the College Board website for more information regarding conceptual concentration ideas, and how to challenge our students to design their own concentrations. From these websites we compiled our own lists of ideas as well as methods for introducing investigative thinking.

Link to Teacher Compiled List:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ba94970lohVXOG00tWMVlkclFoW8ZJG9R5qF7sgvLBI/edit>

Links to Resources:

Boerne Independent School District. Boerne, TX

Concentration Theme Worksheet: <http://www.boerne-isd.net/page.cfm?p=11747>

Timber Creek HS Fort Worth, TX:

<http://campus.kellerisd.net/Teachers/16220/Lists/Announcements/Attachments/79/Worksheet%20For%20AP%20Concentration%20Ideas.pdf>

Student Art Guide: <http://www.studentartguide.com/articles/a-level-art-exam-paper#>

New Paltz Central School District:

http://www.newpaltz.k12.ny.us/cms/lib/NY01000611/Centricity/Domain/138/concentrations_ideas.pdf

Carrollton High School: <http://chsartclassroom.wordpress.com/2012/08/26/ap-concentration-ideas/>

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AP College Board:

http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/44048.html

Piedmont High School Piedmont, CA:

<http://piedmont.k12.ca.us/phs/faculty/gbailey/files/2010/09/Concentration-Ideas1.pdf>

Newbury Park High School: <https://sites.google.com/site/nphsphotography/ap-portfolio-student-samples>

We used these resources to develop various techniques that we tried in our classrooms throughout the year. We collected student data and reflected upon the data.

Results:

Methods used to foster investigative thinking:

A. Modeling:

We created a slide show to model how to add complexity to a seemingly simple concentration theme. Students viewed example concentration artworks of past student work (below) and then answered the following 4 questions:



1. Describe what you see
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "I see different perspectives...some people are looking at the camera and some are not...everyday life...not posed."
2. Create a list of what seems to be the central idea of the concentration based upon descriptions of the work:
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Diversity...interaction...sense of place"
3. Describe how the work demonstrates an original vision and innovative ideas
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Compare to *Humans of New York*...Success and failure...Ethnic groups on the street...Vertical division within each composition"
4. Suggest 2 possible ideas for the next step. How can you add complexity to this concentration idea?
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Use a tripod and photograph yourself within the compositions...Go to different types of street environments like subway, etc."

Link to teacher-created slide show: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Fqxa-glSC087TILn14vhpDkDwYmSQCj0HIMyh4BUIHE/edit#slide=id.p>

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B. Critiques:

Our next step was to design an activity that would allow students to critique existing portfolio pieces to explore, propose or develop an existing theme. This activity was done in all 6 AP Art classes with mixed results. In some classes students worked in small groups consisting of 3 or 4 students, in others it was a whole class activity. In both cases, the teacher was the facilitator and the students were asked to provide the majority of the feedback.

AP Concentration Student Critique Form:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BTyIYpEe_VbCMtIxODOPKqMvLLF4MW1n426IjE6Rq8/edit

1. Describe what you see that is common throughout the work
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "High contrast...Reflection...detail...stylized"
2. Create a list of what seems to be the central idea of the concentration based upon descriptions of the work
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Serenity...deception...different perspectives"
3. After discussing these ideas with the student artist, come up with one concentration
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Environments from a reflective surface...Looking beyond the surface..."
4. Suggest possible ideas for the next step. How can you add complexity to this concentration idea?
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "Is reflection the only time you see yourself?"



C. Conferencing:

David McMichael met with Tim Kaltenecker to discuss his progress with this project. David expressed his occasional frustration with group critiques--Students sometimes limit their opinions to agreeing with previous comments or avoid being critical of friends.

Tim suggested that David try using conferencing with individual students to encourage constructive self-criticism. Tim advised David to speak with a member of the English department regarding methods of conferencing. David met with Duane Smith who offered some simple methods to begin conferencing with AP Studio Art students. The conference format was simple, making use of open-ended questions that encouraged student reflection. Below are early excerpts from two of those conferences:

Teacher: "How can your concentration develop and improve?"

Student 1: "I think I need to include more people in my 'Dream' images...that way they'll look more like my dreams...."

Teacher: "How can your concentration develop and improve?"

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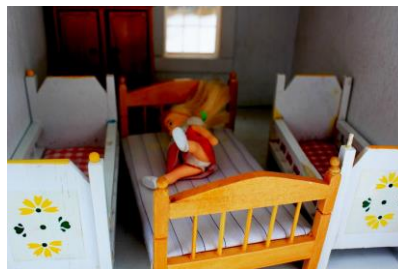
Student 2: "I need more pictures of buildings...like the sides of buildings with more perspective so that I can put them together and make more complicated compositions...."

D. Group Work:

In another AP Photography class students were divided into groups consisting of three or four. Students were asked to read a brief artist statement that had been created by the photographer from the feedback received from the previous peer critiques and compare it with current concentration images in their portfolios.

SAMPLE STUDENT ARTIST STATEMENT:

"The central idea of my concentration is to create a sense of fear through objects, location, and the use of dramatic lighting. My goal is to use photography as a tool to recreate the common nightmares of younger kids. I tried to capture both the spookiness of the objects and the spookiness of the places that surround it. To also evoke the feeling of fear, I take photographs in places such as attics and common places that spark the imagination."



Students were asked to respond to two of the following categories taken from the AP College Board rubric, and provide constructive feedback to help the students continue to develop their body of work.

Categories:

- Evocative theme
- Demonstrates growth
- Demonstrates an original vision
- Shows risk taking
- Effective application of design principles
- Conveys a sense of transformation

SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "This is an evocative theme and shows risk taking because the work evokes a visceral response, it creates a creepy mood because of the lighting and warm color schemes. Maybe next try to include actual children in the shots?"

SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE: "This work demonstrates an original vision because he went out and set up his own shots thinking about the end result and composition. We think that he needs to go look for other locations that are just as spooky like the woods at night."

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Implications :

The critiques were extremely beneficial to our students. Critiques have always been an essential part of the AP curriculum, but we approached them differently this year using our prompts and modeling to generate more complex ideas. In the past small and large group critiques were used primarily for individual assignments, not on a student's entire body of work. The use of peer to peer critiques on the entire body of work helped to open up new ideas and possibilities for the concentration section of the AP Art portfolio.

From our research we learned that the ideas may be below the surface, but our students need to feel comfortable enough to take creative risks. They need practice articulating and visually illustrating their ideas. This process was a way to bring those ideas to the surface, and make the students feel more comfortable to explore a theme that is less conventional and more evocative.

Creating a written record of critique responses was beneficial because it captured a variety of feedback from multiple sources that a student could later refer to in developing their body of work. Having the students write about their ideas earlier in the course also helped to form concentrations with deeper personal meaning. In the past we traditionally asked that students begin writing concentration commentary in April; this year we began much earlier in the school year. This year as **part** of our Summer Homework assignment rather than asking students to shoot photographs based on a familiar theme, we gave them 12 conceptual ideas to generate investigative thinking. For example:

**Summer Homework for AP Photo
Digital Assignments:**

Choose 4 of the following concentration concepts shooting at least 24 images per each idea. Upload images in separate folders in Google Classroom before the first day of school.

1. The peeling back of things to expose what is underneath
2. Human influences on the environment
3. Loss of innocence, loss of self
4. Seeing the world through the eyes of a child
5. Seven deadly sins
6. Musical interpretations: jazz bands / instruments / broken instruments
7. Abandoned places
8. Journey/Evolution
9. The facades & layers people build around themselves
10. Arrival / Departure
11. Personal identity
12. Deterioration/Decomposition

The new questions that we have from our research this year:

- How do we get our students to articulate their ideas through writing artist statements?
- How can we use shared Google documents to record and collect concentration themes and peer feedback?
- Which conferencing techniques (teacher to student) will help students develop concentration ideas?