

Shared Futures: SOTL by Graduate Students

An Object-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning Environmental Topics in the University Arts and Humanities Classroom: A CASTL Fellow's Perspective

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What is an arts and humanities-based approach to inquiry into teaching and learning about environmental topics?

As a Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Fellow in the Michigan State University's new Residential College in the Arts and Humanities in 2008-09, I used a fabric arts classroom as my laboratory to investigate my object-based approach in the context of teaching and learning about recycling and sustainability through the study of feedsack quilts.

What do I mean by my object-based approach?

The object-based approach is simply using creative objects--songs, poems, paintings, photographs, quilts, etc--as the core and foundation of one's teaching. This approach to teaching can be the foundation for an arts and humanities-specific method in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

What can scholars in the arts and humanities take away from the object-based approach, and from this project specifically?

This approach allows for greater interdisciplinarity in the arts and humanities classroom. No topic is out of bounds in teaching and learning in the arts and humanities, not even scientific topics. Any topic, including scientific topics, can be taught in the arts and humanities classroom using creative objects such as those described above.

SOTL Project 2009:

Recycling and Resourcefulness: Teaching Environmental Issues with Feedsack Quilts

Teaching Motivation

To foster environmental activism and awareness in the visual arts.

Teaching Goal

To teach an understanding of an environmental concept within an arts and humanities context. Specifically, to teach a deeper understanding of recycling and sustainability through the fabric arts. I wanted to use art objects such as quilts and fabrics swatches as the sole focus of the lesson, rather than any scientific or environmental literature or data.

Teaching Question

Must art objects used in teaching and learning about environmental issues in the arts and humanities classroom be intended as environmental art, works created to make an environmental "statement"?

Classroom Practice

I employed one two-hour class period in an RCAH Creative Workshop to teach students about recycling and sustainability in the context of the fabric arts. This was done using the object-based approach that I developed for my SOTL project in a workshop on art and social justice in Spring 2008. The artifacts used included primarily Depression Era feedsack fabric and also quilts made from feed, flour, sugar and tobacco sacks, as well as quilts in other media and a clip from a popular film, *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl*. I also generated questions for group discussion and for reflection in the students' bi-weekly written journals:

- ✳ After participating in this lesson, do you consider found/recycled fabric pieces to be environmental art? Why or why not?
- ✳ How, if at all, have these Depression Era feedsack quilts changed the way that you think about recycling?
- ✳ Talk about the relationship between thrift and recycling in your own past experiences.
- ✳ Make a list of things that you would normally throw away, but could instead incorporate into a found fabric piece.

Results

My assessment of the students' learning and my own teaching relied upon arts-based evidence, rather than traditional quantitative or qualitative techniques, as arts-based evidence seemed more appropriate for a project situated in an arts and humanities context.

Students demonstrated a knowledge of the material covered in both classroom discussion and in their written reflections and a deeper understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing about environmental issues, some of which are outside the natural and social sciences. Many students used the fabric and quilts that we had discussed in class to inform their own personal artwork.

Overall, I was very satisfied that the object-based approach works with many kinds of objects, not only those expressly created as environmentally themed works of art.

Past and Future of this Project

I first developed the object-based approach as a CASTL Fellow in 2008, while conducting a SOTL project on teaching and learning about climate change in an arts and humanities context. As an RCAH Fellow in 2009-10, I am further exploring and refining the object-based approach, working in a course on Appalachian Literature and Culture. I plan to continue my SOTL work, specifically with the object-based approach, in my future career.

Further Reading

- ✳ Eisner, Eliot. "The Lessons the Arts Teach." In *Learning and the Arts: Crossing Boundaries*. Ed. By Amdur Spitz. Chicago: Eliot Eisner, 2000.
- ✳ MacDowell, Marsha. Ed. *Folk Art in Education: A Resource Handbook*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1987.
- ✳ MacDowell, Marsha. *Folk Art Study in Higher Education in North America*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1982.

About the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) and the RCAH (formerly CASTL) Fellows

The RCAH is a unique new living and learning environment at Michigan State University. RCAH (formerly CASTL) Fellows enhance the student experience within the College by conducting SOTL projects in conjunction with RCAH classes and co-curricular activities. I conducted my project on *An Object-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning Environmental Topics in the University Arts and Humanities Classroom* in Chris Worland's RCAH 291: Fabric Arts Creative Workshop.

My role as a fellow in the RCAH classroom included helping to develop the syllabus, taking the students to MSU Museum collections for historical inspiration, lecturing on quilting and recycling and quilting and feminism, designing a quilt research "scavenger hunt" activity, helping hang the students' work in the gallery, and creating a survey mechanism to evaluate the course and help plan for the teaching of the Fabric Arts Workshop in future semesters.

Further information on the RCAH Fellows at Michigan State University is available at rcah.msu.edu.

Credits and Acknowledgements:

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Background Photo Credit:

Grandmother's Flower Garden pattern made with feedsack fabric. This quilt was one of the objects that I used in this lesson. Image courtesy of the Quilt Index, www.quiltindex.org.