Example of a group learning experience

Lesson Plan: Socratic Mapping

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Lesson Plan Format:

1.   A description of the assignment

What constitutes socially engaged art? Establishing criteria to answer such a query is a recurring and often circular discussion in courses dealing with the relationship between art and society. What is in, what is out, what is relevant, collaborative, political enough to be counted and what does that mean for artwork and artists that is fall on the other side of the line? This is a problem for arguing the validity, inclusiveness, formal diversity, relevance and multiple historical lineages of socially engaged art. This need not be a problem.

For my course I've attempted to resolve this by creating a lesson drawing from the analytical tool proposed by Pascal Gielen in his essay "Mapping Community Art"[2] (one of three pre-requisite readings for my introductory seminar "Art & The Social: Foundations in Socially Engaged Art"). Based on the premise that all art is relational, Gielen proposes an axis to interpret a range of positions an artwork may take which can reveal the precise manner in which the work is relational (auto or allo relational) and if it's aim is subversive or digestive. Using the axis found in Gielen's text my students are asked to plot out the artworks introduced in subsequent readings, lectures and discussions throughout the term. Their final assignment is to produce an alternative axis, or to utilize Gielen's axis to delve deeper into a specific sub-genre or artist of particular interest. This entire lesson plan is a tool for close reading, discussion and developing a critical self-consciousness about one's relationship to a very broad field of practice.

Overall the impact has been to inspire our students to both think critically about the intentions and outcomes of projects we learn about, as well as to approach their relationship to the "field" of socially-engaged art in a generous and inclusive manner. This is particularly important in facilitating conversation with other graduate degree programs such as Art Education and Studio Art in our small school setting. Building on the model set forth with this lesson, other instructors throughout the program have found ways to incorporate new iterations of the axis that can support their teaching[3].

2.   The actual steps you and your students took to fulfill the assignment.

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[2] Gielen, Pascal "Mapping Community Art" p16-33 from edited volume Community Art (Valiz, 2011)
[3] Thanks to Jess Garz, Paul Farber, Anthony Romero, Shira Walinsky, and Jonathan Wallis for their work in this area.

1. Draw the axis on a sheet of butcher-block paper and discuss the terms: Auto/Allo Relational and Digestive/Subversive; Add some additional paper for further note taking.
2. Provide note-cards on which students can write examples of projects that have resonated with them in the discussion or reading;
3. Ask a student to volunteer to be the "plotter" who will place the note-cards on the axis. The students will begin to debate their understandings of a particular work. Projects that take longer than 5 minutes to agree upon can be placed in a holding area known as the "parking lot."
4. As disagreements occur, it can be helpful for the instructor to step in as a note-taker to record and identify patterns in the conversation. In the past I have recorded this debate through a number of categories of "Notes". "Issues" identify sticking points for how the axis works and either need to be addressed immediately or identified and discussed further (eg. Time, Scale, Intent, Result, Context, Object vs Process ("Thingification"), Emotional Response). "Constraints and Guidelines" record the agreements made between the students about what assumptions are accepted and determined when determining a project's position on the axis (eg. Point of View is the present even on historical work, Plotters are the audience rather than speculating about other audience experiences), and much more).
5. As the project unfolds the "Notes" begin to inform plot location changes and greater clarity of the overall axis image occurs with more cards moving from students hands and the parking lot onto the axis with greater speed.
6. In the end a discussion can be held about what was learned from the tool itself, though the process of plotting should be emphasized as the objective over the outcome. This embodiment of collaborative practice and deliberation can serve as a model for socially-engaged art practice as well as practically be a way to generate discussion of readings that involves all students more than a traditional "close reading" might encourage. A follow-up project can be developed to allow students to plot their specific research interests on the axis or to create new maps based on specific issues or constraints that had a particular resonance. This can help to balance out the group process that may privilege those with collaborative experience over those who work more individually or privately.

3. Description of what actually unfolded and the outcomes.

It should be noted that the readings and lectures which structured each week were led by students and therefor they were able to both emphasize particular works they were compelled by and introduce additional projects they felt were missing from the readings.

The students were invited to reflect at the end of the day on the readings and artists that were introduced (this was a 6-week intensive but could be spread throughout a semester or compressed to 2-3 weeks). They were invited to write down the names of the projects that resonated with them most onto note cards and then a student was asked to volunteer to be the plotter to post those cards on the axis. This process required at least a half hour to make any progress. It benefited greatly from being revisited for at least 1 additional exercise because the students would often debate amongst themselves about the qualities that a certain project represented and want to come back and revise the location of the plot point. At times we revisited a project website or reading to discuss in more detail a finer point about a work or be reminded about what information we were able to access through available sources to limit speculation about what audiences or participants may or may not have experienced.

The project was flexible and could be skipped over if there was not adequate time and revisited the following week with examples of projects from the two subsequent class meetings combined. It did not need to be rigid and could be concluded at any stage, though for my purposes it served as the starting and completion activity for the 6 week seminar.

Course participants have been able to demonstrate their awareness of the specific content of readings, engage in debate about project outcomes and assessment from both artist and audience perspective, and identify the strengths and limitations of analytical tools like the axis. Most notably, all students have demonstrated high levels of participation in this process and the repetition of certain projects and artists through the plotting process have ingrained a diverse range of artistic references into their memories which have resurfaced in subsequent courses and thesis papers. Finally, the other faculty in the program have been able to build on the analytical tool of the axis and incorporate it into their own courses with these and other students.

4.   Overview of the discussion and reflection/evaluation process

Throughout the process students were invited to comment on the mapping activity and to propose adjustments to the process. This often led to suggestions about "Issues" or "Constraints" that needed to be named, and occasionally to students developing their own independent maps as final projects. Additionally, students would offer input in the form of introducing their own artists/projects to be plotted based on their research and concerns.

Students have consistently commented that they find this process enjoyable and that over time they understand its function as a means to instigate conversation that may not occur around close readings or lectures. Some students who have a stronger preference or need for concrete outcomes have become frustrated in the beginning and middle of the process, but will express satisfaction at the final map. Students who are not as interested in a horizontal process of discussion and decision making have become frustrated and channeled their energy into their independently defined final map project. Overall, the process is an embodiment of group process needed to produce deliberate collaborative art. As an accompaniment to the foundations seminar for graduate students this has also been concomitant with their acclimation to school in general.