



**Student Perspectives of a 21st Century Approach to Introductory
Studio Art Curriculum at Western New England University:
An Action Research Study**

A Doctoral Dissertation in Summary

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INTRODUCTION

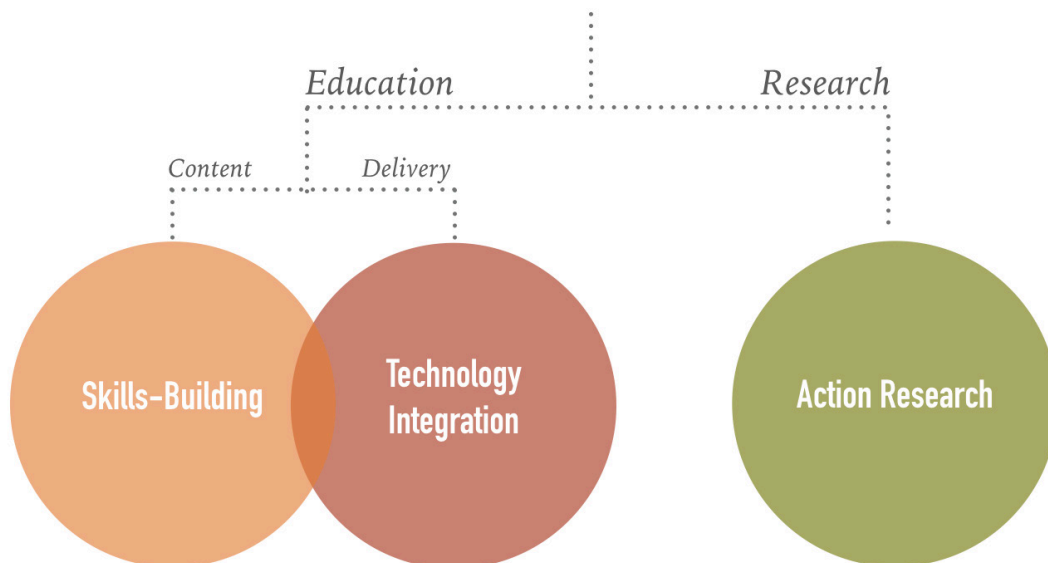
Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to unify technologically-based pedagogy in the visual arts with specific institutional goals, including higher order skills and a learner-centered environment, and to consider the impact of web-based modules on student learning and engagement. The study was driven by the concept of improvement of practice, a primary purpose of action research in education (Newton & Burgess, 2008). As another tenet of action research is to discover ‘what works’ in a specific environment (Robson, 2011), this study established strengths and challenges of the web-based elements of the curriculum as perceived by Western New England University’s student population.

Defining a 21st Century Approach

As a response to globalization and an evolving educational landscape at the turn of the 21st century, the literature established higher order skills-building and technology integration as two prominent trends in higher education. These trends can be reflected through both curriculum design (Acedo & Hughes, 2014) and course delivery modalities (Thiele, Mai, & Post, 2014); and practice-based research helps to effectively apply contemporary trends while honoring site-specific needs (McNiff, 2013).

ENTERING THE 21ST CENTURY



Curriculum acts as the core for development of higher order skills, creating the venue for students’ empowerment and global participation (Acedo & Hughes, 2014).

Over 86% of institutions of higher education claimed to offer online courses in a 2014 survey, and approximately 70% of those institutions considered online offerings as a critical aspect of their long-term strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

“Research that celebrates important issues of everyday living should be given as much priority as traditional forms—often more perhaps, for practical, practice-based research is a key means of contributing to holistic and relational forms of cultural, social, and intellectual progress” (McNiff, 2013, p. 4).

Problem Background

The contribution of visual arts curricula to 21st century skillsets and a well-rounded education is recognized by influential scholars (Skorton, 2009); however, art programs still face loss of funding and significant program cuts across the United States (Lampe & Parmer, 2013). Chapter One outlined the need for at-risk art programs to adapt in order to maintain relevance and value in today's uncertain climate, and proposed thoughtful integration of technology and intentional 21st century skills-building as means to do so. An applied approach at Western New England University was selected for this study because of the university's student-centered values and lack of a full art program and major. The supplemental nature of the arts at WNE reinforces the need for its arts curricula to resiliently align with both the values of the institution and broader educational trends.

Although they do not always lend themselves to the kinds of metrics used to demonstrate proficiency in reading and math, the arts and humanities play a vital role in the educational development of students. They keep and convey our cultural heritage while opening us up to other societies and civilizations around the globe. They help us explore what it means to be human, including both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions. If science and technology help us to answer questions of “what” and “how,” the arts and humanities give us ways to confront the intangible, to contemplate the “why,” to imagine, to create. If ever there were a time to nurture those skills in our young people, it is now, when our nation’s future may depend on our creativity and our ability to understand and appreciate the cultures around the world as much as on our proficiency in reading and math.

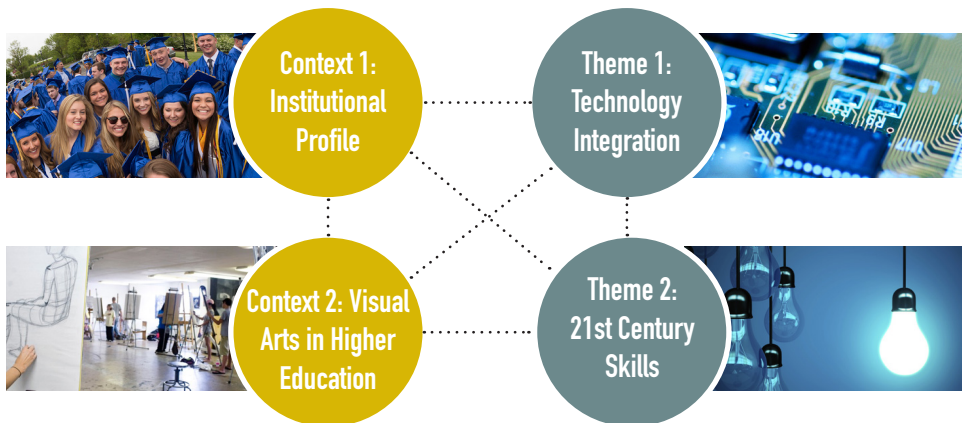
-Cornell University's President David Skorton, 2007 address “Transforming Arts Teaching: The Role of Higher Education”

Research Questions

1. How do students describe their experience with technology and web-based instruction in the WNE introductory drawing curriculum?
 - a. What do students consider to be the most effective use of technology and web-based instruction to enhance learning and engagement?
 - b. What do students consider to be the most prominent hurdles in regards to technology use and web-based instruction in the curriculum?
2. Do students feel that the WNE drawing curriculum promotes 21st century higher order skills such as critical analysis, reflection, creativity, visual literacy, and information fluency?

Contexts and Themes

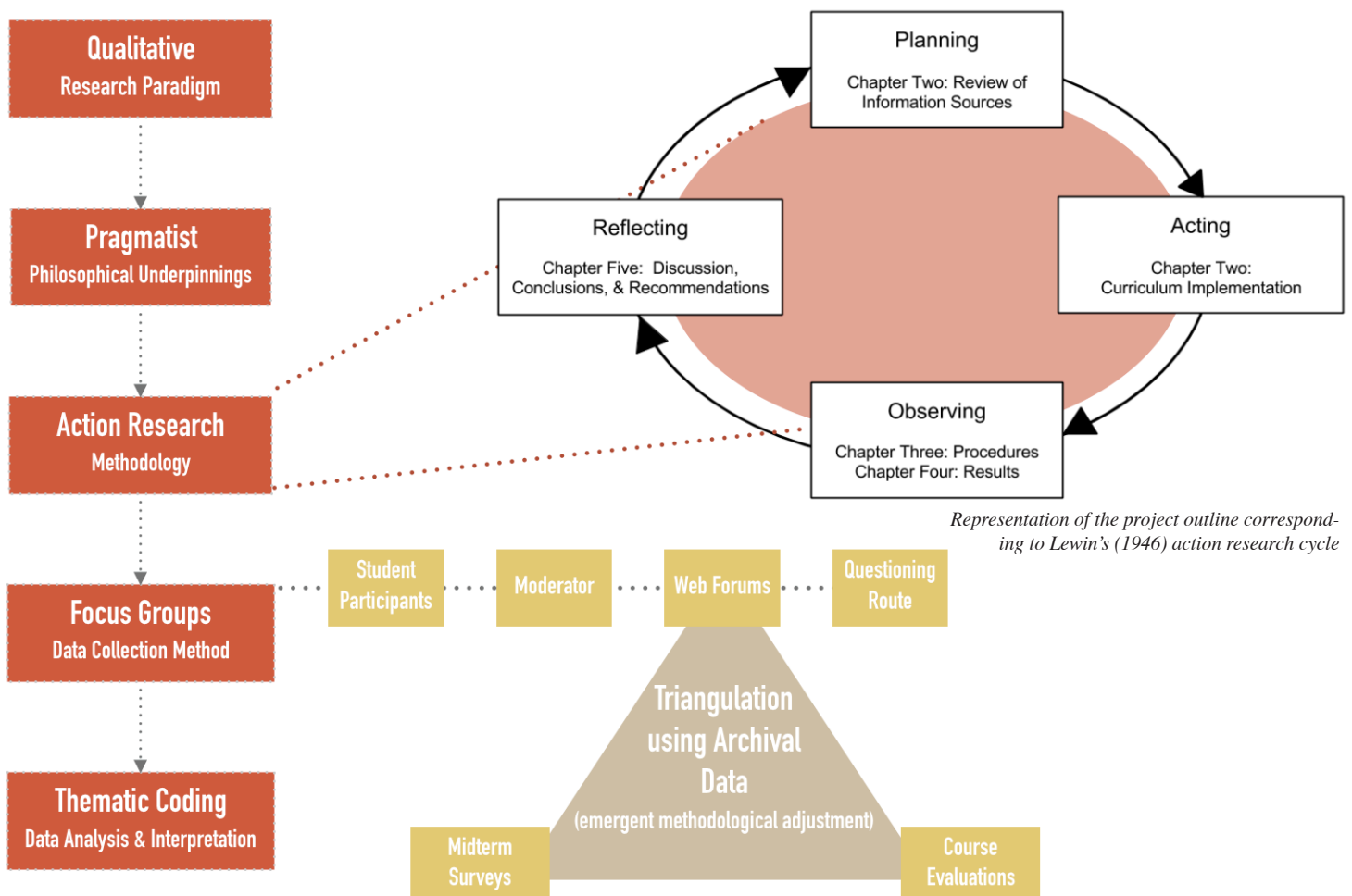
Two contexts were established to provide a foundation for this location-bound and discipline-specific study: the institutional profile and visual arts in higher education. The two themes of this research were technology integration and 21st century skills-building. These contexts and themes were synthesized and cross-referenced to frame this research.



Chapter Three Summary: Methodology

Grounded in pragmatism, this study's methodology was designed to find applicable solutions in a real-world context (Creswell, 2014; Robson, 2011) and also elevate practice-based research as a valid epistemological structure (McNiff, 2013). Chapter Three justified the use of focus groups to support action research because they collect rich qualitative data from a homogenous group of people (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Litosseliti, 2003). Informed by Gothberg et al. (2013) and catering to a limited participant pool, asynchronous web-based forums were selected to capture a participatory group dynamic while removing time and location-based limitations. Prior students from three recent semesters of Drawing I (ART 105) were invited to participate in the focus groups with a goal of three groups of four to six participants per group. An unaffiliated moderator with relevant experience was selected to remove bias from the data collection process, and a questioning route was established to create a framework for the focus groups aligned with the research questions. The focus group methodology was designed using best practices outlined by Krueger and Casey (2015) and Tuttas (2015).

Chapter Three also outlined the study's timeline and procedures, including institutional and student consent, instrument testing, and focus group preparation. The research operated under ontological assumption of participants' subjective realities (Creswell, 2014), the epistemological assumption that practice-based researchers have an embedded perspective (McNiff, 2013), and the methodological assumptions that qualitative research is emergent and context bound (Creswell, 2014; Robson, 2011). Limitations included the amount and type of data available through a small and voluntary group of participants (Litosseliti, 2003) and the fact that proximity bias is inherent to action research (McNiff, 2013). The web-based methodology contributed to delimitations by removing physical and voice cues of traditional focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015), and the research is intrinsically narrowed by its scope, defined by a specific set of themes and executed at a specific location. Chapter Three closed by describing how the study used articulated, attributional and emergent data and a thematic coding approach informed by Creswell (2013), Massey (2011) and Robson (2011) to analyze student perspectives of a 21st century approach to introductory art curriculum at Western New England University.



CONTEXT 1: INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

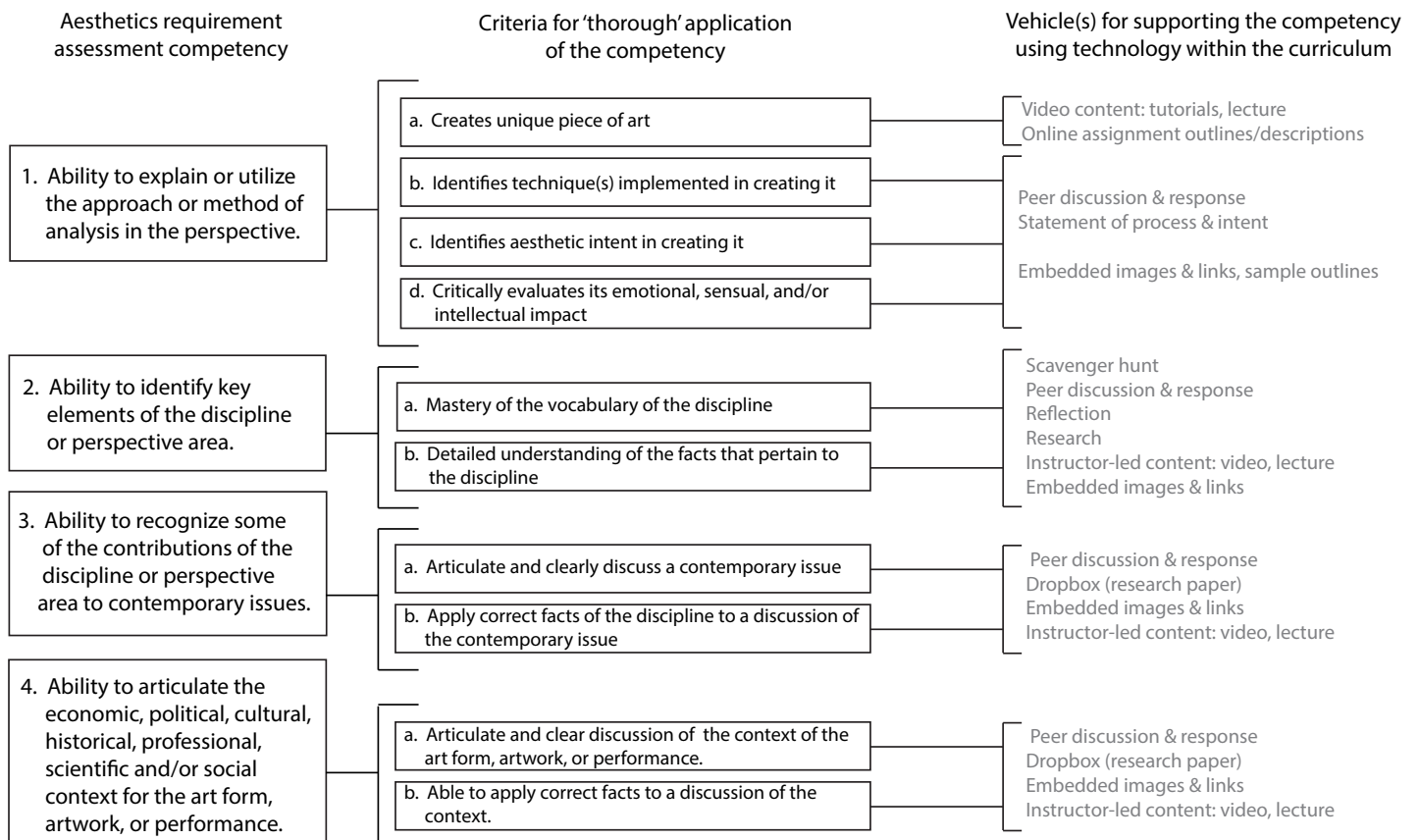


Overview

The institutional background at Western New England University was established as a context for this study because the study is meant to be applicable and location-bound. Analysis of institutional materials clarified that WNE (2015) prioritizes student-centered learning and aims to equip students with a well-rounded education including career-oriented and global, transferable 21st century skills. The current strategic plan outlined a commitment to expanding student exposure to the arts and thoughtfully integrating technology into teaching and curricular delivery (WNE, 2009), both of which align with this research. Resources at WNE, including faculty training, administrative support, and available technology, all worked in favor of the study despite being identified as potential hurdles by the literature.

Aesthetics Perspective

The Aesthetics Perspective requirement was considered for this study in terms of holistic institutional goals, however the assessment rubrics were also used to specifically implement technology within the curriculum:



Study Results & Implications: Institutional Goals

“Personally I feel like higher education should be about expanding your knowledge and building a community and connections; for me that’s what I make of it. I think all of that stuff helps you prep to be an amazing well rounded person that will therefore be prepared for a career. Unfortunately I think higher education is mostly viewed by the larger society as just a pathway to a job. Many people are just concerned with doing the work to pass their classes so they can have a degree to get a job that will pay off their debt.”

-Focus Group Participant 3.2

“I think that exposure to [21st century] skills has been great at WNE. I believe that this school really focuses on not only helping someone grow as a student but also as a person. I learned so many skills from different classes and different professors. I think that these skills are extremely important for my future career goals as well as my own life goals. They have made me a more well-rounded person.”

-Focus Group Participant 1.3

The current WNE Strategic Plan, driven by the institutional mission and values, summarized “Direction One: Focus on multiple aspects of the development of the whole student” as follows: “Through a continually evolving curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, travel initiatives, environmental stewardship, and exposure to the arts, we lay the foundation for students to become leaders in their communities and citizens of the world” (WNE, 2009, p. 3). The plan further outlined initiatives to expand on arts initiatives and resources, as well as a desire to prepare students for career and global participation by building transferable skills. Once again, the data illustrates that student perspectives directly align with institutional goals. Students enthusiastically reinforced that their experience at WNE has supported personal growth and 21st century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, visual literacy, and information fluency. Students prioritized the promotion of well-roundedness versus career-specific skills when asked what they thought was most important about higher education and also felt that 21st century skills were strengthened by the Drawing I curriculum. Both of these student perceptions, which were nearly unanimous in the data, support the inclusion of the ‘Aesthetics Perspective’ general education requirement. This data can be used when evaluating the curriculum at large, and, if challenged, to justify the importance of aesthetics courses for non-majors at Western New England University.

Further Implications / Recommendations

- Continue direction set by current Strategic Plan to reinforce and expand arts initiatives
- Further research needed if administration wishes to explore transferable skills supported by other curricula
- Review faculty training for intentional skills-building in curricula (Belluigi, 2009; Flores et al., 2012; Paul, 2005)



Study Results & Implications: Educational Technology

The strategic plan at Western New England University proclaimed a desire to thoughtfully integrate technology into teaching and curricular delivery (WNE, 2009), and student perspectives reinforced this direction with overwhelmingly positive reactions to both educational technology in general and WNE's learning management system, Kodiak. Students felt that the features in Kodiak helped them stay organized and enhanced their learning, but they did feel that the navigation can be a little overwhelming, especially when the platform is used differently in each class. This perspective directly reflects student perspectives established in the literature, which identified LMS navigation and usability as prominent hurdles (Poon, 2013). Focus group Participant 3.2 added a helpful suggestion for students to counter navigation issues in Kodiak:

I definitely think an in class walk through would definitely help with making navigation easier. It's kind of like going over a syllabus in class--all the expectations are outlined and discussed. I think the exact expectations for using Kodiak should be outlined too. How often to check, where in the classroom to check, content, grades, etcetera.

This is a viable suggestion for all faculty at Western New England University, and could be communicated with recommended best practices for syllabi. Faculty could also create a video walkthrough of Kodiak to be posted as an initial announcement within the platform, which would make course expectations accessible for the entire semester while its reusable nature would create efficient workflow for the instructor. This follows the recommendation of Cheung and Hew (2012), who successfully used video tutorials to remediate student overwhelm and lack of understanding in regards to technology use. Asynchronous audio-visual content that maximizes efficiency is also a hallmark of student-centered learning (Moukali, 2012), which also aligns with WNE's institutional values.

The data from this study supports continued use and even further promotion of Kodiak to support the student experience. However, the data showed very clear preference for Kodiak to be used as a complement rather than as the primary delivery method of instruction, and also reinforced the need for faculty training and onboarding. Inconsistent or ineffective use of the platform was one of the leading hurdles established in the data, and was also a primary hurdle in the literature (Gedik, Kiraz, & Yaşar Özden, 2012; Machado-da-Silva et al., 2014; Thiele et al., 2014). Although the institutional profile in Chapter Two outlined substantial resources available for faculty development and platform use at WNE, student perspectives indicated that these resources may not currently be used to their full potential.

Review of the literature identified lack of faculty training as a widespread obstacle for technology integration in higher education (Bender & Vredevoogd, 2007; Bleffert-Schmidt, 2011), however considering the wide availability of resources at Western New England University, this could potentially be categorized as a change management issue. The hierarchal structure of higher education, by detaching the change agents from those who are expected to support change, often creates resistance amongst faculty (Alasadi & Askary, 2014). Since students are reporting that a fair number of their instructors are refusing to implement Kodiak to supplement their courses, it may be helpful for administrators at WNE to identify if resistance is a prominent factor. Meredith (2013) stated that in order to create faculty empowerment about change, "the focus must be on student learning, rather than accreditation or other external pressures" (p. 16). Considering this advice, perhaps the results of this study, which identified lack of effective technology as a primary impediment to student learning, could be used to encourage faculty training with and use of the platform.

"I think technology use in the classroom is necessary in today's world. Many of the assignments are accessible to students through Kodiak and it definitely makes it easier to view everything for all classes in one place."

-Focus Group Participant 3.2

"I feel that technology and online learning are very helpful when providing a background or basis for the class but I prefer to do my learning in class because I find that I am more invested in the course."

-Focus Group Participant 1.4

"I think the biggest hurdle was getting used to using Kodiak and navigating it. It was a little intimidating and overwhelming at first, but I learned to love it and found it useful after time."

-Focus Group Participant 1.4

"I think the biggest hurdle in using Kodiak is that every professor uses it differently, and some don't use it at all, so it's difficult to trust that everything you need will be there. If you get used to professors always posting assignments, grades, and lectures on Kodiak, it's frustrating when some professors don't even have a Dropbox."

-Focus Group Participant 1.5

I do think that online modules can and should be used beneficially in classes but only if the professor is well versed in the platform. Professor St. Laurent incorporated it well in her class, but I've taken other courses with far less tech savvy professors and the result was more frustration than benefit. For example, one professor I had for an online course was having issues with his microphone and couldn't resolve the issue. He was just recording his lectures in the day time section of the course and the recordings were completely unintelligible, so I had to try to decipher what was going on from the video portion showing him working out exercises on paper without his explanations for what he was doing. In another class I had, the professor had difficulty uploading files and setting up quizzes.

By the time the quizzes were uploaded, there was little time to complete them. Also, finding materials and having all the resources became a difficult task.

-Focus Group Participant 2.1

CONTEXT 2: VISUAL ARTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Overview

The second context for the study outlined the unique qualities of visual arts education, pointing to its historical background and evolution. The longstanding atelier model developed from the master/apprentice relationship common in the 13th and 14th centuries and was formalized via the Royal Academies of England and France in the 18th century (Soueles, 2013). Atelier studio instruction typically features hands-on learning, small class sizes, extended course hours, and extensive critique and feedback (Bender & Vredevoogd, 2006). The promotion of the arts in the 19th century as a vehicle for personal enrichment was also influential because it not only bolstered the growth of art programs, but also created an enduring paradigm that arts education is a dispensable luxury instead of an essential component of a well-rounded education (Lupton, 2005). Industrialization at the turn of the 20th century inspired the Bauhaus, a school of design that used collaboration and multi-dimensional experimentation with materials to enrich rigorous skills and craftsmanship (Salazar, 2013). The Bauhaus model defined technique as teachable and art as unteachable, creating a rift in art education between fine and applied arts (Singerman, 1999), and this lasting separation has called into question whether or not the two categories should be approached in the same way in terms of curricular best practices. Another question arising in the literature was whether or not traditional studio methods, being under-researched (Salazar, 2014) and deeply entrenched (Lupton, 2005), are still viable in a contemporary classroom. When considering the future of visual arts education, the literature also illustrated how a global economy, growth of creative fields, and technological innovation should also inform current pedagogical trends (Jones, 2011; Salazar, 2013; Soueles, 2013).

Study Results & Implications: The Traditional Atelier

Despite criticisms in the literature, student perspectives in this study referenced several hallmarks of traditional studio instruction as key to learning: hands-on experience, demonstration, and feedback. Students also provided less prominent but equally positive feedback about staple methods of the Bauhaus: technique-building and experimentation with various media. Traditional instructional methods in the visual arts were not the focus of this study but still surfaced as conspicuous themes. However, it is worth mentioning that although the Drawing I curriculum embodied several qualities of traditional instruction, the curriculum was also designed to address several potential issues identified by the literature. For example, Lupton (2005) suggested that lengthy critiques, a narrow definition of ‘art,’ and instructor-prescribed application of content are all outdated features of the traditional atelier. Drawing I at WNE meets once per week for two hours and 40 minutes, which is approximately half of the course hours typical to a traditional studio course for art majors. Lupton’s idea that extensive critiques are not the most effective use of studio time becomes even more prominent when studio hours are limited by the course schedule, and so formal group critiques were heavily reduced to one to two per semester. Drawing I at WNE was also designed to engage non-majors with the content by allowing students to individually seek content relevance, often expanding beyond art-historical examples (i.e., tattoo, craft, and marketing materials). To summarize, the Drawing I curriculum did not represent all qualities of traditional studio instruction, but those that were included were met with enthusiasm and were considered vital to learning.

“Having the instructor check in at different points throughout the class to see how we were doing was very helpful. It was a great time for her to evaluate my progress and give great feedback and tips, as well as answer questions.”

-Anonymous

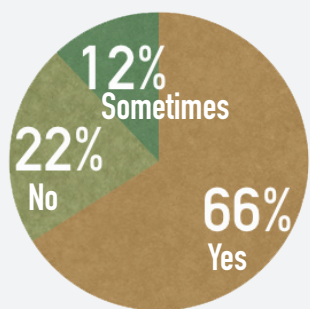
Survey Data Keyword Frequency:
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Study Results & Implications: Blended Learning in the Visual Arts

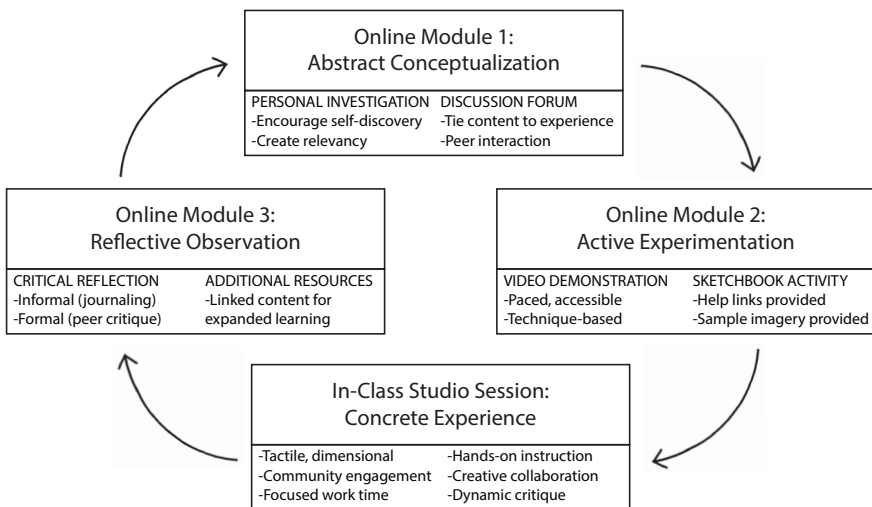
Shannon et al. (2013) concluded that “a balance between independent learning (often online modules) supported by group learning in face-to-face encounters [does] increase satisfaction with the subject and stimulate enthusiasm for further learning” (p. 139).

Do online discussions promote relevance and real-life context?



The literature revealed that a blended instructional model is generally received favorably by students, often shown as being a preferred delivery method over fully-online or fully-on-ground (O’Connor et al., 2011; Poon, 2013). Although the literature established a need for visual arts education to adapt in response to technological advances and a global economy (Jones, 2011; Salazar, 2013; Soueles, 2013), there were few studies available specifically investigating technology use in studio art education. However, two themes were quite evident in those that did: visual arts educators are hesitant to implement technology, and it is widely thought that technology should be used to enrich not replace studio instruction (Bender & Vredevoogd, 2006; Saghafi et al., 2012; Silva & Lima, 2008; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007). In this study, the data illustrated that a blended (or technology-mediated) model is not only viable for studio instruction, but can be an enhancement that promotes learning and 21st century skills-building. Students fundamentally expressed that web-based modules were appropriate for a studio course, except for some conflicting reviews of written assignments. As detailed in the technology integration section, asynchronous tutorials were seen as one of the most important elements to enhance learning and other web-based content was perceived as a vehicle to engage students with course concepts. Use of technology in the classroom to introduce content via slide lecture was also reviewed favorably by most students. The Drawing I curriculum at WNE embodies the idea that studio instruction can offer the benefits of technology integration without losing all qualities of the traditional atelier, and aims to exemplify blended studio curricula within the current scant body of related literature. Although the curriculum is notably designed to cater to a specific institution and student body, this study broadly implies potential usefulness of technology for studio instructors.

Information in action: Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning as applied to the WNE Drawing I curriculum



Blended models may vary per course unit or activity, but one example would be an in-class demonstration and practice of gesture drawing followed with at-home curated video content of raw Disney animation and a written reflection. This particular activity was mentioned frequently in the data as an effective use of technology to reinforce in-class activities and solidify an understanding of the course content and terminology.

Study Results & Implications: Arts Integration

Although it is becoming increasingly common for institutions of higher education to deem visual arts programs as non-essential (Lampe & Parmer, 2013), the results of this study do bolster the value of the visual arts as a means to promote well-roundedness and transferable 21st century skills. Archival data (final course evaluations) for the study revealed a few students who showed little interest in the topic of art in general, however focus group data showed unanimous agreement that the Drawing I course helped to build 21st century skills. Students also valued transferable skills over career-specific skills in their educational experience as a whole and spoke with great enthusiasm about exposure to topics other than their majors. While this sentiment may not transfer seamlessly to other institutions, it still carries potential implications and offers some support for programs who may be fighting to maintain funding and relevance.



THEME 1: TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Overview

A blended or technology-mediated classroom was selected for the Drawing I curriculum at Western New England University to create an enhanced learning environment and to capture the ‘best of both worlds’ benefits of online and in-person instruction as described within the literature (Cheung & Hew, 2012; Deutsch, 2010; Moukali, 2012; Norberg et al., 2011; Poon, 2013). The chapter detailed the most prominent student-facing benefits of blended learning discovered in the literature and described how they were integrated into the Drawing I curriculum: administrative tools, differentiated instruction, learner-centered instruction, and experiential learning. Asynchronous content was highlighted as a means of promoting a learner-centered environment (Poon, 2013), and the variety of content and delivery available via web-based modules was said to cater to different learning styles (Gedik et al., 2012; Osgerby, 2013). The literature also associated blended learning with student satisfaction, increased student success rates, low withdrawal rates, and effective means of assessment (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013; Melton et al., 2009; Norberg et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2011). Several common student-centered hurdles were established in regards to technology integration in higher education: difficulties with technology usability (Cheung & Hew, 2012); dissatisfaction with curriculum content and quality of instruction (Bleffert-Schmidt, 2011; Deutsch, 2010); and lack of motivation and persistence (Kutaka-Kennedy, 2015).

Study Results & Implications: Platform Content & Administration

Students indicated that effective use of the learning management system, Kodiak, was one of the biggest strengths of technology integration in Drawing I. They appreciated how images, text, and video were all embedded and easily viewed, and appreciated the weekly layout with checklists and clear due dates. The strong presence of course layout and administration as a theme in the data is incredibly important because it places value on administration, which was one somewhat unexpected result emerging from the data. The only main complaint about layout was that sometimes there was a lot of information on one page. It can be concluded that content is important, but making that content easy to view and navigate is also a strong priority as well. This feedback encourages the instructor-researcher to continue streamlining and refining of the course setup on Kodiak, which applies to Drawing I but is also easily transferable to other courses and could carry broad implications for technology use across disciplines or locations.

“I liked how Kodiak was laid out and had everything we needed.”
- Focus Group Participant 1.5

“The Kodiak classroom for this class was set up perfectly and really helped with the learning experience.”
- Focus Group Participant 1.3

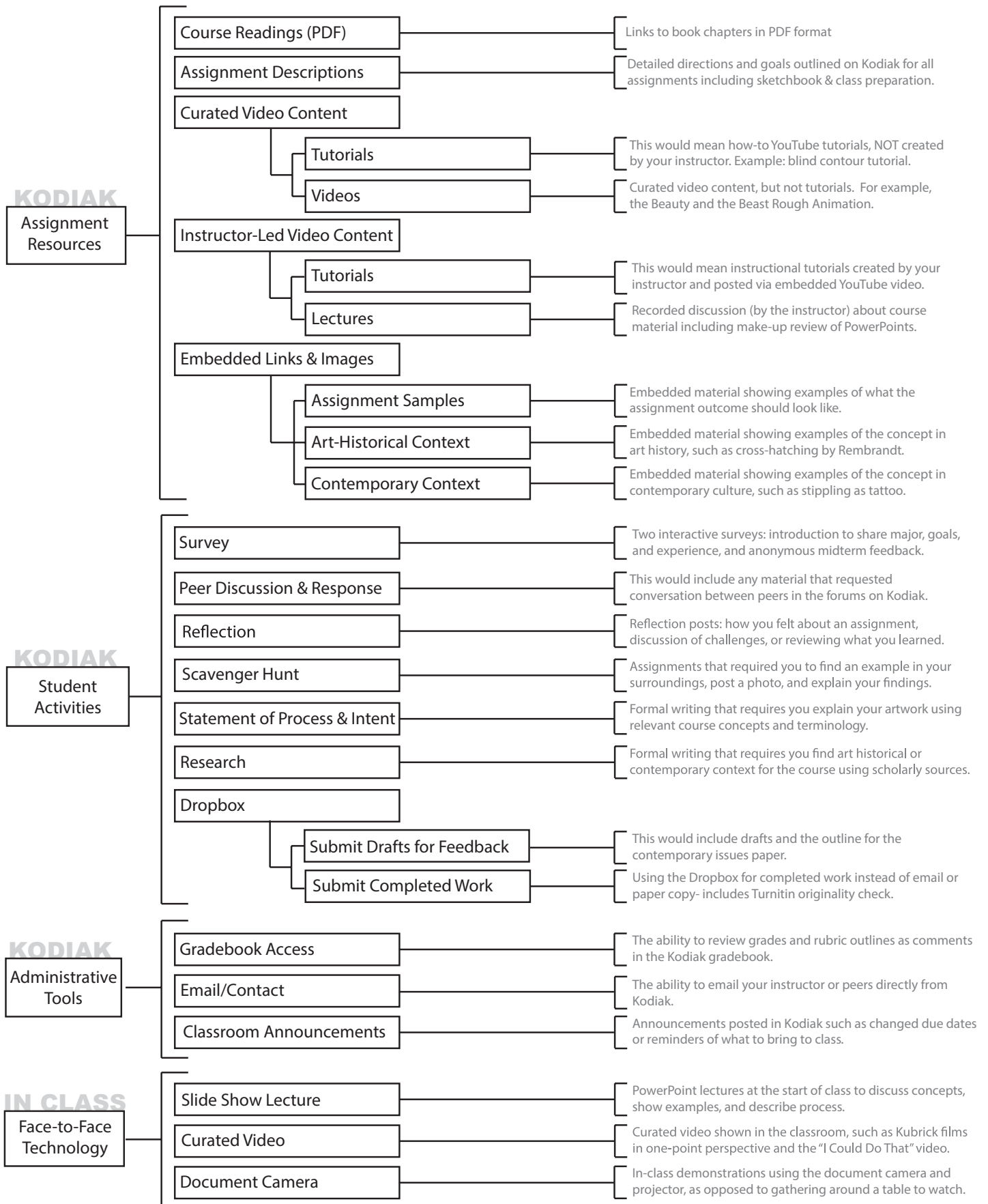
“I feel that this class was set up so that we would utilize Kodiak so support and enhance our learning throughout the course.”
- Focus Group Participant 1.2

The following page provides an overview of technology use in the Drawing I curriculum, which was used as both an outline of content within the study as well as a PDF handout for student participants.

Drawing I Curriculum: Technology Overview

CONTENT CATEGORIES

DESCRIPTIONS



Study Results & Implications: Content Variety

The data revealed several contradicting perspectives which was fairly expected, as the literature showed widely varied student response to specific web-based instructional content (Bauk, Scepanovic, & Kopp, 2014; Poon, 2013; Thiele et al., 2014). Although multimedia formats and a variety of activities help cater to different learning styles (Tseng & Walsh, 2016), this simultaneously means that content will not formulaically suit all students. Several students recognized personal bias in their reactions to web-based modules. On a midterm survey, one student stated, “I don’t really like the discussion portion, but that’s just a personal preference,” and Participant 1.3 in the focus groups added, “I think that engagement has to do with personal preference and what seems more interesting to you as a student. I love art and it is one of my hobbies so I was always engaged during this class.” Although overwhelmingly popular content within the data is useful for establishing best practices, it is important to recognize the implication that variety is key to successful instruction.

“Assign another paper!”
-Anonymous

“Too many writing assignments for an art class”
-Anonymous

“Personally, I feel like it’s easier to type out what I’m thinking and feeling rather than say it to someone in person and I felt like the threads helped students to express themselves.”
- Focus Group Participant 3.2

“I do not see any benefit to the discussions. They simply add more stress onto my week.”
-Anonymous

Study Results & Implications: Supporting the Studio

“The video tutorials and live doc cam demonstrations helped me learn because they were real time footage of someone doing what I was supposed to be doing successfully. Seeing the process happen gave me a visual step by step procedure and it allowed me to see what I should do to get a desired result. For example, what pencil will give me what mark.”
- Focus Group Participant 3.2

“Having the slide show lectures in front of us was nice so that we were able to take notes on specific concepts and/or techniques. Personally being able to write down notes helps me learn/remember things faster and easier. This was especially helpful for concepts because when it came time for formal critiques I was able to use the appropriate terms correctly because of how I learned them in the slide show and lecture.”
- Focus Group Participant 1.3

Participant 1.2 stated that video tutorials “certainly enhanced our skills, but also allowed us to get a better understanding behind why we were doing what we were doing.” Participant 3.2 commented on the format of these modules, pointing out, “None of the videos were very long either which I think was important.”

This study aimed to understand student perspectives of technology-based instruction in the Drawing I curriculum, including successes and hurdles. Students cited some general technological benefits that aligned with the literature, such as the ability to go paperless and submit assignments electronically (Osgerby, 2013) and added efficiency and organization (Gedik et al., 2012). As discussed earlier with institutional implications, these benefits of technology use are certainly applicable across all disciplines. However, technology was shown as a means to specifically support studio pedagogy as well. When discussing demonstrations, students seamlessly switched between referencing live demonstrations and video tutorials, consistently naming both as key elements to foster learning. The benefits of asynchronous video demonstration (self-paced and ability to pause, rewind, and rewatch) were noted by students, which reinforces the point made by Bender and Vredevoogd (2008) and Saghafi et al. (2012): some content may simply be more effectively or efficiently conveyed in a reusable, asynchronous web-based module. In addition, web-based tutorials can be used as part of a flipped classroom model, preparing students for activities in the studio (Shannon et al. 2013). Students felt that video content deepened their understanding of course concepts and helped them master skills by seeing visual examples and step-by-step demonstrations. Such a strong reaction to this type of content implies that students could benefit from more video demonstration, and the curriculum could include this type of content to support each at-home drawing assignment.

The literature showed that online supplemental materials can help students identify different levels of context and meaning (Abrahmov & Ronen, 2008). The data from this study supported this claim, with several students mentioning various online activities as vehicles for both learning and engagement. The data could be further analyzed to improve practice by identifying content that was particularly popular and aim to recreate that experience. The use of web-based discussion was perhaps the most contentious element of the course with the most common complaints about the class referenced the online discussions, often specifically targeting participation requirements.



THEME 2: 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Overview

Chapter Two of this study discussed the role of 21st century skills-building in higher education and how it was specifically addressed within the Drawing I curriculum. The literature outlined a need for today's students to become equipped with transferable higher-order skills (Kutaka-Kennedy, 2015; UNESCO, 2013), and the skills selected for this study were creativity, critical thinking, visual literacy, and information fluency. Critical thinking was established as a vital skill that can be bolstered by studies in the visual arts (Lampert, 2006), but the literature stressed the need for it to be intentionally targeted within curricula in order to be successful (Belluigi, 2009; Flores et al., 2012; Paul, 2005). A similar sentiment to target instruction was shared about creativity, suggesting that intentional instruction of creativity can be facilitated by a student-centered learning environment (Henriksen et al., 2016; Newton & Newton, 2014; Yoo & MacDonald, 2014). Visual literacy and information fluency were established by the literature as essential for today's students (ACRL, 2011; UNESCO, 2013) and a strong link was expressed between these skills and supplemental web-based instruction (Abrahmov & Ronen, 2008; Arnold-Garza, 2014). Chapter Two closed by outlining a contrasting view that over-emphasis on workforce preparedness can be seen as a detriment to the spirit of higher education (Bok, 2006; Logston, 2013), but recognized that larger ideological issues are beyond the scope of this study.

Study Results & Implications: 21st Century Skills in Drawing I

This theme provided the least amount of debate or contrasting views, as students broadly valued these skills and also felt that the Drawing curriculum supported these skills. It is worth noting that several criticisms of other study topics were pulled from archival data, and the theme of 21st century skills was not specifically targeted in any of the anonymous midterm or final evaluations. The focus group participants seemed to be satisfied with the course as a whole, and therefore, when analyzing 21st century skills, the possibility of a positive spin should be noted. Students appropriately forged a strong link between visual arts education and the skills of creativity and visual literacy. They spoke at length about creativity and critical thinking, but barely mentioned information fluency aside from listing it as being supported in the curriculum and in their educational experience at Western New England University as a whole. An implication for practice may be to focus less on information fluency in the Drawing I curriculum and instead put more effort into building the skills that students are able to directly link to their experience in the class.

Another common theme in the data was the transformative qualities of 21st century skills, recognizing that building creativity and visual literacy challenged their thinking and forced them to step out of a comfort zone. Students, therefore, unintentionally displayed and referenced critical thinking in their analysis of the other skills and throughout their ongoing conversations in the focus groups. The focus group data as a whole showed evidence of what Belluigi (2009) called the reflexive and emancipatory qualities of critical thinking. While students were asked to self-assess their own progress in these skills, the data calls into question whether assessment could also include direct analysis of student work in future research, searching for established markers of the desired skills.

"I definitely think that technology use is completely necessary for 21st century skills. There's only so much you can do in the classroom while a professor is lecturing. You usually just take notes, but online you can interact with materials at your own pace, you can freely review them, watch videos over and over, etc. It's helpful to build comfort with the skills mentioned. This course undoubtedly has helped me build on the skills outlined."

- Focus Group Participant 3.2

"Drawing I definitely builds creativity and connections between visual images and information. As I don't classify myself as a particularly creative person, I felt that the exercises we did in class (such as the organic abstraction, free drawing, and final project) challenged me to become more creative. I had to think about the assignments from a different perspective."

- Focus Group Participant 2.1

Study Results & Implications: Intentional Skills-Building

In the literature, the most prominent concept surrounding 21st century skills was the need to thoughtfully include skills-building in curriculum design versus expecting them to naturally emerge (Abrahmov & Ronen, 2008; ACRL, 2011; Belluigi, 2009; Flores et al., 2012; Hattwig et al., 2013; Henriksen et al., 2016; Newton & Newton, 2014; Yoo & MacDonald, 2014). The data from this study asks the same question on the other side of instruction: should students be intentionally learning these skills versus expecting them to naturally emerge? In the student focus groups for this study, Participant 3.1 stated, “Prior to having these 21st century skills pointed out to me, did I realize I engage in these specific four skills regularly.” Other students seemed to share this perspective by indicating that they thought the skills were valuable but seemed to feel they were somewhat abstract concepts. Would it help to provide more ‘why’ in the curriculum, and transparently reveal skills-building instruction students? Their response to skills-building suggests that defining these terms as intentional benefits of the course, perhaps in the syllabus, may be of value. This idea was reinforced by Participant 1.3, who stated, “I feel that many people might think that an art course might not be a class to improve critical thinking and is simply just visual learning.” If this sentiment is in fact widespread, it may be of use to thoroughly describe the intended transferable benefits of the course throughout the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

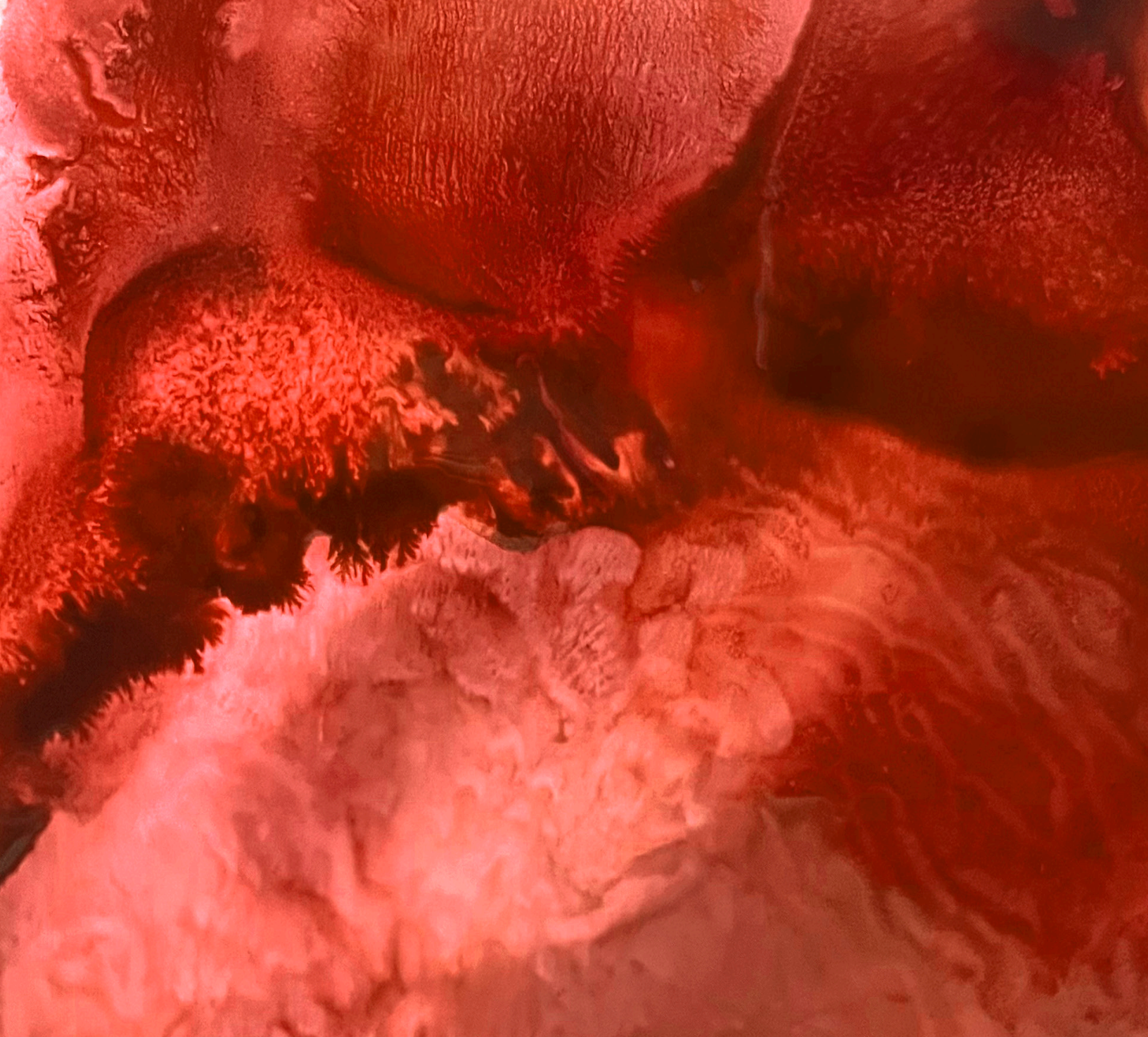
This action research study captured one action research cycle as influenced by Lewin (1946), Stenhouse (1975), Carr and Kemmis (1986), and McKernan (1991). The purpose of this study was to evaluate student perspectives of technology integration and 21st century skills-building in a Drawing I course at Western New England University, responding to global trends in higher education (Acedo & Hughes, 2014), an uncertain climate for visual arts programs (Lampe & Parmer, 2013), and a call to elevate practice-based research as a valid epistemological pursuit (McNiff, 2013; Schön, 1995).

Researching the two themes within the contexts of being site-specific and in the visual arts discipline, this study resulted in data that validated a blended instructional model and revealed positive views of 21st century skills-building in the curriculum. Student perceptions reinforced the need for visual arts pedagogy to celebrate its unique historical roots with very strong positive response to demonstration, hands-on experience, and continuous feedback. Video tutorials were seen as the strongest manifestation of traditional studio instruction in a web-based format, but the study also revealed that a wide variety of technology-based activities and content can cater to differing student preferences and enhance both learning and engagement. Discussions, and specifically their related participation requirements, received the most negative feedback from students, indicating a need to reevaluate ways to build community and interaction using technology. This study reinforced the literature by revealing a strong desire for web-based content to be implemented both thoughtfully and effectively, with platform layout and administration being key student concerns. Platform use in Drawing I appeared as a central theme supporting student success. Students called for widespread and consistent use of the learning management system on campus with very positive views of the platform in general and unwavering complaints about instructors who refuse to use the platform as a whole or to its full potential. However, they enthusiastically praised Western New England University for its focus on well-roundedness and transferable skills, fully supporting exposure to diverse courses outside their majors. Students felt that both the university and the Drawing I curriculum helped build valuable skills that will help them succeed in the workforce and in life.

While generating a deeper understanding of the Drawing I curriculum at Western New England University using student perspectives, this study provided implications for practice on both curricular and institutional levels. The study also touched on central ideas within visual arts pedagogy and higher education at large, creating a departure point for future research in these areas.

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