

This paper reflects on a range of factors that contributed to the relative success of a recent art history seminar in ancient gender and sexuality at Berea College, a small, private, Christian liberal arts college in Kentucky. The seminar is required of all junior and senior art history majors, and its goal is to serve as an introduction to the methods and theory of art history. Each year, the topic of the seminar changes, so students are exposed to a range of approaches and of topics. This particular topic, however, also attracted a number of students from other majors, including history, Classics, and English.

Many factors impacting the course were largely beyond the instructor's control. For example, the institution, founded as a part of the abolitionist movement, has always been coeducational, interracial, and progressive; its seal reads "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth" (Acts 17:26). The student body is predominantly Appalachian, predominantly Christian, majority first-generation college students, and all low-income. The non-art history majors who signed up for the class were largely self-selecting. However, a number of decisions by the instructor do seem to have contributed to the course's success. Critical decisions were oriented as much toward the style of the course as toward the selection of content. The maintenance of a comfortable classroom climate for students from a wide range of backgrounds was prioritized through a series of strategies.

First, expectations of and by students were discussed explicitly; the students determined what rules of engagement would encourage substantive and courteous discussion. Second, a full range of theoretical positions (iconography, iconology, semiotics, Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and a variety of feminist and queer theories) were used as lenses through which to approach topics of gender and sexuality, which encouraged students to address both objects and issues in complex, nuanced ways; theory was used predominantly as a quest for good questions, rather than for answers, which allowed diverse opinions to coexist in relative peace. Third, the content was structured in such a way as to allow students time to build familiarity and comfort with challenging ideas and with each other; we moved from topics more oriented toward gender to those oriented toward sexuality, since some students were more comfortable discussing gender than sexuality. Fourth, students often discussed issues in small groups before discussing them with the class as a whole, allowing those who were quieter in temperament the opportunity to refine their ideas before addressing the class as a whole. Fifth, we drank tea and hot chocolate together in class several times during the semester. While beverage consumption might seem to be a "fluffy" tactic, there is substantial sociological and anthropological evidence that people who consume food or drink together build social ties, and those social ties facilitated relaxed but honest and serious discussion. While these strategies allowed the creation of a comfortable classroom climate in this context, some may be adaptable to other contexts.