

**Argumentative Research and Expanding Critical Understandings of Arts Practice**

Michael DeWhatley, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Charlotte Canning, and Rebecca Fitton

Department of Theatre and Dance, University of Texas at Austin

**Author's Note**

Author Paul Bonin-Rodriguez is now at the University of Michigan. We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Department of Theatre and Drama, University of Michigan, 1100 Baits Dr., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2085, or sent to [pbonrod@umich.edu](mailto:pbonrod@umich.edu).

### **Argumentative Research and Expanding Critical Understandings of Arts Practice**

*Art, (Your) Money, and the Nation* (UGS 303) introduces first-year students at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) to the interconnected political, social, economic, and aesthetic contexts that impact artists working in the United States. The class assesses how contemporary American society regards its arts and cultural programming according to various metrics. Though not an arts administration course, *Art, (Your) Money, and the Nation* teaches both costs and benefits of the arts so that students can account for multiple forms of value in the arts in the same way that an administrator might.

In this article, we offer a description and analysis of a semester-long project our students undertake, the research paper portfolio. As ChatGPT and other generative AI programs lead instructors to question the best way to approach paper-writing, we offer a strategy to develop students' argumentative and research skills through scaffolded, iterative steps that help prevent academic dishonesty. The result is a project that deepens our students' understanding of the historical, social, and economic relevance of the arts in the U.S., as well as the costs for doing such work, while advancing their skills in forming arguments and producing meaningful scholarship. Through this multifaceted assignment, students are invited to invest in a subject that draws together three streams of course inquiry (art, money, and nation) and “put [their]oar in the water” of arts discourse (Burke, qtd. in Graff and Birkenstein 13).

### **Course Context**

Taught by one or two faculty instructors and two graduate teaching assistants in the College of Fine Arts, *Art, (Your) Money, and the Nation* regularly enrolls 60 students. The course was initially developed in 2011 by Paul Bonin-Rodriguez and Charlotte Canning as a first-year experience course known as a “Signature Course,” designed to promote critical thinking and academic writing. The class meets three times per week, with two 75-minute

sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays led by the faculty instructor, and one 50-minute session led by the graduate teaching assistants on Fridays. Friday sessions explicitly focus on writing and research techniques and offer space for student peer review as well as one-on-one feedback from the TAs. Mentorship on this project is highly personal, even though the class has around 60 students. These Friday sessions also include training on using UT-Austin's library and research resources and a visit from a representative from the University Writing Center.

Undergraduates are encouraged to pursue a Signature Course outside their discipline; thus, most students are not from the College of Fine Arts, and few of them are interested in pursuing arts careers professionally. This class recognizes the value of students becoming aware of their cultural consumption and the mechanisms of support and resources required to bring culture to them. If we are teaching appreciation, we are teaching appreciation of infrastructure as much as the final product. The research paper portfolio brings together the three strands of the course (art, money, and nation) in a way that is compelling to the student, argumentative, and uses evidence to support the claims each student makes in the course of their investigation. UGS303 is specifically marked with a Writing Flag, which means it is designed to give students experience with writing, revision, and peer review. As a result, the research paper portfolio, which comprises six scaffolded assignments – Proposal, Abstract, Annotated Bibliography, First Draft, Second Draft, and Final Draft – amounts to 45% of the total grade in the course.

### **Literature Review**

When developing the course for the University's Signature Course program, the co-instructors, Canning and Bonin-Rodriguez, were also working to infuse a notion of *artistic-citizenship* in the undergraduate curriculum for the Department of Theatre and Dance. The citizenship theme also readily addressed the "core purpose" of the university's academic

strategic plan – “to transform lives for the benefit of society” – which catalyzed the creation of the Signature course program (“Commission of 125”). *Art, (Your) Money, and the Nation* served as the mechanism through which the instructors highlighted the historical systems required to bring the arts into public culture – in effect, making artistic-citizenship possible and apparent by revealing the multiple intersections of cultural infrastructure and consumption with economics, politics, and society in general.

From the outset, course materials were largely drawn from economic and social histories of the arts, cultural policy gray literature, and articles highlighting modes of organizing and advocacy emerging in the twenty-first century. A sampling of the literature includes John Kreidler’s “Leverage Lost: Evolution in the Nonprofit Arts Ecosystem” and Sheila McNerney Anderson’s “The Founding of Theater Arts Philanthropy in America: W. McNeil Lowry and the Ford Foundation, 1957-65,” both of which regard the central role of philanthropic support in the nonprofit arts. INCITE!’s *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* attests to the mercurial nature of philanthropic support, and the potential for philanthropic money to co-opt social justice missions. So that students were able to clearly read market sectors, students studied Ann Markusen et al.’s “Crossover: How Artists Build Careers Across Commercial, Nonprofit, and Community Work.” To recognize the prevalence of art in everyday life, they read Ellen Dissanayake’s “The Universality of the Arts in Human Life.”

Case studies in class are shaped for students to read across time and cultural experience. The students watch the film *The Art of the Steal* (2009), directed by Don Argott, and debate the merits of the relocation of the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia despite the donor’s intentions. To gain a greater sense of the meaning of the Barnes Collection’s contemporary art holdings, students study the controversies surrounding the Armory Show in 1913 and Advancing

American Art exhibition (1946-48), moments when contemporary trends in art met considerable resistance. They also study the business side of hip-hop in Dan Charnas' *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, and Jay-Z's *Decoded*, as well as the genre's cultural ties in Hisham Aidi's *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*. They study the Federal Theatre Project through a reading of Susan Quinn's *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* and the feature film about that era, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1999), directed by Tim Robbins.

To understand a more immediate precursor of their cultural experience, the students read the development of the current federal infrastructure for U.S. arts, as well as a moment of extreme crisis in the form of the Culture Wars of the 1990s. In addition to Donna Binkiewicz's historical account of the first decades of the National Endowment for the Arts, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980*, students review Public Law 2009 from the 89<sup>th</sup> Congress, which created the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities in 1965. Peggy Phelan's "Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA and You: 'Money Talks:' October 1989" and the recording of performance artist Holly Hughes' show about being censored during that era, *Preaching to the Perverted* (1999), provide context and an aesthetic presentation of the Culture Wars.

The instructors recognized that a focus on iterative writing would provide the means for students to articulate not only their experience of arts and culture, but also their understanding of how and why those experiences may have affected their lives. Our work takes influence from texts on writing and research, in particular Booth, et. al.'s *The Craft of Research*, which offers these reasons for research and writing: "Write to Remember," "Write to Understand," and "Write to Test Your Thinking" (1.2). Together, the course literature encourages students to think about

the historical and present interconnectedness of cultural production and political and economic systems and how students can develop and support an independent argument. These sources encourage students to use writing as a way to encourage self-reflection and an expansive understanding of the direct and indirect ramifications of cultural policy.

### **Course Summary**

The course description, which appears at the beginning of the syllabus, introduces students the critical engagement that will follow:

This course examines how contemporary American society regards its arts and cultural programming – music, visual arts, theatre, dance, performance, and other forms of folk and “traditional” arts – and asks what costs and benefits result from the complex systems of trade and exchange that support the arts.... Students preparing to participate in the arts either as arts professionals or consumers will comprehend the costs and benefits of the arts from multiple perspectives. Students will also develop a capacity to identify arts opportunities in the US today and ascertain how those opportunities may be capitalized upon in the current economy. The class weaves together economic, political, and aesthetic threads, focusing on the U.S.’s historic and contemporary relationship to all forms of artistic expression.

The research paper portfolio invites students to develop a research question that interrogates their relationship to the course terms: art, money, and nation. Students are expected to develop one research paper over the course of the semester that focuses on an event, production, exhibition, concert, or funding source of their choosing (approved by the instructors) that we have not discussed in class. This paper is argumentative and based on evidence gleaned from careful research that puts forward the students’ understanding of the topic from rigorous engagement with different perspectives and data gathering tools. We expect the students to argue through demonstration, not assertion, while speaking to the main themes of the course.

The research paper portfolio consists of six related assignments: 1) topic proposal; 2) annotated bibliography; 3) abstract; 4) first draft; 5) second draft; and 6) final paper of about 2,000 words. The topic proposal is a 300-word articulation of the student's proposed subject with a clear sense of their argument, method of research, significance, and the relationship of the topic to notions of art, money, and nation. The annotated bibliography includes a breakdown of at least six sources (three of which must be peer-reviewed), summaries of those sources, as well as critical analyses of the sources they have chosen. The abstract is a 200-word overview of the final paper's focus and purpose. Each of these initial parts of the portfolio build critical thinking skills as students routinely analyze the arguments people make about art, money, and nation while refining their own. As the students draft out their papers, they work with each other, the TAs, and the instructors to refine and reinforce their arguments through research and methodology. The teaching team assesses the drafts on their quality of argument in addition to the growth the student showcases through their editing process.

### **Results**

The scaffolded nature of the portfolio as well as the personal attention given to each student allowed the teaching team to see student growth over the course of the semester. We also offered two surveys to the students, at mid semester and end, to let students speak about the progress they were making and where they continued to struggle.

Assignments were assessed with an eye towards increasing value over time, which helped prevent students from encountering penalties early on in the semester that might become impossible to overcome. Students chose a wide range of topics for their papers. For example, students have connected Mexican muralism to the Mexican Revolution from 1900-1910, pointed to the anti-consumerist tendencies in Mark Rothko's public art projects, and commented on the

growing influence of Asian American artists in rock music as seen in the case of Mitski Miyawaki and Michelle Zauner/Japanese Breakfast, and assessed the rise of Asian American cinema. At semester's end, students also competed for the Signature Information Literacy Award, which recognizes the application of library research.

Scaffolding also affected how we assessed the different parts of the research paper portfolio. The portfolio as a whole was worth 45 points (which matched its 45% of the total grade in the course), and the first four assignments (topic proposal, abstract, annotated bibliography, and first draft) were all valued at five points. The second draft was worth 10 points and the final paper was worth 15. Each piece was assessed using a rubric based on the assignment description that the students could view as they worked. Recognizing that scaffolded assignments lose their efficacy when students miss deadlines by a wide margin, we maintained a late policy. Assignments were docked a letter grade for each day work was turned in late.

In the surveys issued at the end of the course, our students demonstrated a deep awareness of the intersection of art, money, and ideas of nationhood, often as a direct result of the work they did in their papers. One student who wrote about the cultural and financial value of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) responded by saying that the three themes of the class helped them understand how NFTs might be considered both a form of currency and culture while also wielding political impact. Students also commented on how the scaffolding of their papers led them to improve their writing skills, consider how they might independently scaffold other big assignments, and better structure a focused argument.

In some cases, students have also sought out the undergraduate Minor in Arts Administration (MAMA), the 15-hour minor offered through the College of Fine Arts. Given the



amount of mentorship offered through the course, students often request letters of recommendation.

### **Discussion**

Reflecting upon these results, we feel that the assignment supports the development of artist-citizens who are aware of how the arts are inextricably tied to questions of financial and political control and are able to think critically about arts value. By writing papers and doing research that focused on topics that highlighted these interconnections, students grew conscious of internalized systems and developed arguments that sought to explain or resist inherited cultural structures. For example, one student researched country music radio stations, finding that historically they did not feature women artists back-to-back as a matter of policy, not listener preference. In their evaluations, we found students who became increasingly aware of their roles as cultural consumers and how much art impacted areas of their lives, like clothing, they had not seriously considered previously.

We also found that students had wide-ranging definitions of what constitutes “art.” Several of them ended up writing papers about emerging technologies, including non-fungible tokens (NFTs), AI-generated artwork, and cultures of food. Particularly for students interested in learning about AI, this assignment illuminated ethical dilemmas and questions even for students who largely felt AI was a positive long term development. Whether or not the instructors disagreed with their definition of art or the central argument of their paper, we tried to assess their work on the ability of our students to support their claims with evidence, which only made their papers stronger.

This assignment also encouraged our students to connect to resources across the university. In their evaluations, students spoke about how much they appreciated learning about

the library resources and writing center so early in their university careers. For many of them, this class represented a turning point where they realized how much more independent they were going to be in selecting their writing topics and developing their own arguments. While we still offered a great deal of mentorship in the writing process and encouraged them to use the University Writing Center, the first-year students had to take on a level of argumentative assertion that many of them had not in the past.

Because of the iterative nature of the portfolio, we are still working out the best way to distribute the deadlines of different assignments. The time necessary to assess and respond to 60 papers can be considerable, even for two TAs, and we should have set our first deadlines earlier so that the students had more time to draft and re-draft as we got closer to the end of the semester. We might also have explored media literacy in more detail with our students. Many of them, particularly in an age where misinformation is a great concern, have trouble distinguishing legitimate sources of information from ones that are false, based on uninformed conjecture, or are not relevant to their argument.

### **Conclusion**

Although research papers remain an effective tool for the development of critical thinking and communication skills, generative AI programs are challenging traditional methods of college writing assessment. In *Art, (Your) Money and the Nation*, we found that assigning a paper through a series of iterative steps not only prevented our students from depending on AI to create ideas on their behalf, but also challenged them to read each other's work more critically. In 2022, this class worked primarily with students who had been in an isolated learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic for several semesters. By facilitating in-person, interpersonal critique, which had not been part of their high school experiences, we helped them develop skills

necessary to navigate a large university. The students' ability to choose their own topic and explore infrastructural connections to cultural experiences and/or products that interest them was highly valuable in this endeavor. The research paper portfolio turned into a passion project for many of our students, who became outraged or fascinated by the offstage context in which some of their favorite musicians or performers operated. The portfolio also encouraged a type of slow learning, in which the students thought more deeply about their topic because it was a subject they revisited repeatedly through different iterations of the paper. Peer review exercises offered them the means to seek peer mentorship and learn about their own writing approach in the process. Overall, the research paper portfolio allowed for a deep and reflective process of investigating cultural infrastructure while encouraging students to develop their own perspectives on the economic and political components of art-making.

### References

- Aidi, H. (2014). *Rebel music: Race, empire, and the new Muslim youth culture*. Penguin Random House.
- Argott, D. (Director). (2009). *The art of the steal*. [Film]. Maj Productions and 9.14 Pictures.
- Binkiewicz, D. (2004). *Federalizing the muse: United States arts policy and the National Endowment for the Arts 1965-1980*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Bonin-Rodriguez, P. & Canning, C. (2017). How a Nation Actually Works: Preparing Undergraduates for Activist Citizenship through the Arts. In T. Underiner & S. Etheridge-Woodson (Eds.), *Theatre, Performance and Theories of Change*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Booth, W., Colomb, G., Williams, J., Bizup, J., & Fitzgerald, W. (2016). *The craft of research*, (4th ed.). The University of Chicago Press.
- Caves, R. (2000). *Creative industries: Contracts between art and commerce*. Harvard University Press.
- Charnas, D. (2011). *The big payback: The history of the business of hip-hop*. Penguin Publishing Group.
- Dissanayake, E. (2008). The universality of the arts in human life. In J. Cherbo, R. Stewart, & M. Wyszomirski (Eds.), *Understanding the arts and creative sector in the United States*, (pp. 61-74). Rutgers University Press.
- Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2024). *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (6th ed.). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hughes H. (1999). *Preaching to the perverted*. Hemispheric Institute, <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/jq2bvsn7>.

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. (2017). *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex*. Duke University Press.

Kreidler, J. (1996). Leverage Lost: The Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 26(2), 79–100. doi:10.1080/10632921.1996.9942956.

Markusen, A., Gilmore S., Johnson, A., Levi, T. & Martinez, A. (2006). *Crossover: How artists build careers across commercial, nonprofit and community work*. Grantmakers in the Arts. [https://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Crossover\\_How-Artists-Build-Careers-Across-Commercial-Nonprofit-Community-Work.pdf](https://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Crossover_How-Artists-Build-Careers-Across-Commercial-Nonprofit-Community-Work.pdf)

McNerney Anderson, S. (2007). The founding of theater arts philanthropy in America: W. McNeil Lowry and the Ford Foundation, 1957-65.” In R. Schanke (Ed.), *Angels in the American theater: Patrons, patronage, and philanthropy*, Southern Illinois University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (2017). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.

Phelan, P. (1990). Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: “Money Talks”: October 1989. *The Drama Review*, 34(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145999>.

Quinn, S. (2021). *Furious improvisation: How the WPA and a cast of thousands made high art out of desperate times*. Plunkett Lake Press.

Ringer, J. (2012). “Liberating ‘Liberatory’ Pedagogy: What Do We Mean by ‘Liberty’ Anyway?” In G. A. Olson and L. Worsham (Eds.), *Education as civic engagement: Toward a more democratic society*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Robbins, T. (Director). (1999). *The cradle will rock*. [Film]. Touchstone Pictures.

University of Texas at Austin, The. (2004, September 30), *Introduction: the Commission of 125*. <https://sites.utexas.edu/commission-of-125/introduction>.