Project Year

2016-2017

Project Title

Teaching Mesopotamian Art through OERs

Project Team

Marian Feldman, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, History of Art and Near Eastern Studies, Faculty
Megan Lewis, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Near Eastern Studies, Fellow
Avary Taylor, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Near Eastern Studies, Fellow

Audience

The primary audience will be undergraduate students enrolled in two classes AS.010.364 *Babylon: Myth and Reality* and AS.010.421 *Creating Sacred Space in the Ancient Near Eastern World*. The enrollment for the classes combined is estimated at 20-25. The project is a continuation of one begun in 2015 in conjunction with my survey class in Mesopotamian art, and as open-access teaching resources, it has a reach well beyond these two classes to the broader public.

Pedagogical Challenge

The arts of Mesopotamia – the "land between the rivers" in what is today Iraq and Syria – represent some of the earliest complex artworks dating back to 3500. Works from intricately carved seals to sculpture offer a wealth of arts that inform on the social, political, economic, and religious spheres of multiple ancient cultures, including Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria. The cultural heritage of Mesopotamia is particularly threatened at the moment due to the current political situation in Iraq and Syria.

Teaching this material at the undergraduate level, however, is a challenge as there is no reliable, up-to-date textbook available; the most recent useable textbook dates to 1954 (H. Frankfort, Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient). The only general publication dedicated to Mesopotamian art, D. Collon's Ancient Near Eastern Art (1995), is deemed by most scholars to be too erratic in its content to be used in undergraduate teaching.

Solution

To address the challenge, in summer 2015 with the support of a Technology Fellowship grant I created online modules to serve as a textbook. Five modules were created and another two are in progress. I propose to continue these modules, creating 5-7 more for my fall classes. They are designed as OERs using a pre-existing platform, OpenStax CNX, hosted through Rice University. Materials for the modules consist of freely available content and content created by me and the graduate student fellows.

OER modules permit multi-media and non-traditional formats for conveying information, including virtual reconstructions and walk-throughs, videos, and hyperlinking in addition to providing up-to-date informational entries for the ancient artworks. These modules engage students before actual face time in the classroom permitting more discussion of the complex conceptual aspects of Mesopotamian art during class time.

Assessment Strategy

As I did last fall, I will work with CER staff to devise a mandatory survey that students take through the Blackboard course website, the completion of which would be tied to either points for the class or withholding their grade. The survey will ask a variety of ranked questions (eg. From not very useful to very useful) and short answer questions. In addition to this more directed assessment, I will assign several short writing assignments over the course of the semester that ask students to engage with specific issues raised in the modules. Performance on these assignments will allow me to assess how much further I am able to push student thinking and engagement beyond simple mastery of facts and data. I plan to write and deposit with CER a report on the results of the assessment, including my qualitative assessment of how students performed in comparison with my past experiences teaching this material over the last 17 years.

Faculty Proposal

Teaching Mesopotamian art at the undergraduate level is a challenge as there is no reliable, up-to-date textbook available; the most recent textbook dates to 1954. I teach a number of different classes on Mesopotamian art that I have been teaching for over 15 years. Currently I use a mix of articles by different scholars, which undergraduates find difficult because of the lack of consistency.

In 2015 I created on-line modules to fulfill the duties of a textbook on Mesopotamian art. These modules were designed as Open Education Resources using OpenStax CNX, hosted through Rice University, which promotes the production of small "knowledge chunks" in an open license venue. Five modules were developed and two more are currently in process. I propose to continue creating an additional 5-7 modules for my two undergraduate classes being taught in fall 2016.

OER modules of instruction allows for multi-media and non-traditional formats for conveying information, including virtual reconstructions, walk-throughs, videos, and hyperlinking. I am aware of the issues surrounding the use of copyrighted materials and worked closely with Macie Hall (CER) and Don Juedes (Sheridan Libraries) last year in order to work around these issues.

The modules engage students more deeply than I can when I have to rely on my lecturing and a patchwork of articles to convey information to the students. The response from students last year in the online assessment survey through Blackboard was overwhelmingly positive. All 12 students completed the anonymous survey, which consisted of five questions. 83.3% of the respondents said the modules were "very successful" in providing information related to the course content, while the remaining 16.7% said they were "somewhat successful." The responses to the other questions were also generally positive, with appreciation for the multimedia components and for the fact that the modules aligned well with the lectures. I also presented the project in a session on new digital pedagogies in art history at the annual conference of the College Art Association, and have received positive feedback from colleagues outside Hopkins regarding the open access nature of the modules.

The project will build upon the foundation begun last year of an open-access, dynamic, on-line teaching tool for Mesopotamian art that could be accessed at diverse levels from introductory art history survey teaching to advanced undergraduate courses on the ancient Near East.