

Pre-Texts for Arts Administration: International Students Achieve High-Order English-Language Skills

Pre-Texts, a flexible framework that adapts to any context, was the professional development methodology for two courses in Arts Administration in Boston University's Masters program during the spring semester of 2018 and the summer session of 2018. Both courses needed to address a double challenge: how to tackle difficult academic material and how to engage the many Chinese students who were English-language learners.

Facilitated by Polly Lauer, Jahnvi Singh, and Alex Gaydos, Pre-Texts offered a solution that stretched language competency and self-confidence. Through creativity and equitable spaces for working, students developed the foundational skills of high-order literacy, public speaking, civic competence, critical thinking, and innovation.



Warm up with Augusto Boal's 1, 2, 3.



Connecting Derrida with a sculpture

Students in Professor Lanfranco Aceti's *Arts of Barcelona* course enjoyed five sessions of Pre-Texts through the spring semester of 2018. Starting with an excerpt from a required reading, Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*, students co-facilitated various creative activities to explore the text. They wrote film reviews, composed music, drew veritable masterpieces (speculating on the silences of the text), and guided each other on gallery tours through the Harvard Art Museums, all while untangling the text and acknowledging the power of diverse perspectives. In the final session, students observed that they had grown closer to one another; they found confidence in public speaking and learned to enjoy tackling troublesome texts. Professor Aceti was amazed by the student growth, both in terms of community dynamic and of reading comprehension. In stark contrast to the first session when the Chinese students were rather silent and uncomfortable, by the fifth session they had blossomed into eager participants and appreciative listeners. As a professional development tool, Pre-Texts inspired designs for educational arts programs in a variety of settings, because the approach customizes links between art and text. The admiration for all generated by Pre-Texts promises good innovative collaborations among a range of stakeholders, both here in the United States and abroad in China. Yixin "Trista" Cai, who intends to return to China after graduation, commented, "There is a developing Chinese arts education sphere, and we, as the upcoming generation, shoulder the responsibility to make sure it's good and effective. Pre-Texts is a great basis for that."

For the 2018 summer session of Aceti's *Comparative Cultural Policy and Administration* course, which later took students to Dublin and London, Pre-Texts chose Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as raw material for training. Facilitated at Harvard's Peabody Museum, the workshop once again offered opportunities to connect the museum's exhibits to the target text as students developed confidence in speaking and writing while exercising their creative skills towards academic and professional goals. The first session began as always, with ice breakers, followed by the text read out loud as participants designed book covers. After book covers, everyone asked a

question of the text, so that students had the chance to examine it both for basic language use and for high-order concepts. They later led a gallery “amoeba tour” of the Peabody’s third floor: each student took a turn to adopt a line from Foucault for interpreting an object on display and then guided the others to reflect on the proposed connection. In another particularly effective student-designed activity, the novice facilitators selected keywords from the text and randomly assigned them to participants. The participants then had to write a poem of at least six lines from phrases in the text to develop references to the assigned word. After each poem was read out loud, the group had a round table discussion about how some words stimulated similar poems and what that indicated about themes of the text. It was especially useful for the Chinese students as a mature and meaningful way to build vocabulary. “What Did We Do?”, a key Pre-Texts moment that concludes every activity, requires participants to share reflections on the particular process. It caught on quickly, with outspoken and insightful comments from the Chinese students who appreciated the responsibility to speak, which relieved a hesitation to use English publicly.



Foucault for the Peabody

The BU Arts Administration workshops demonstrated the holistic nature of Pre-Texts: It meets learners at their starting point and invites them to explore a challenging text as they acquire language proficiency, high level theory, and professional development all at once, while simultaneously building an accountable community.



“I think there wasn’t one activity that stood out to me the most, but rather how all the activities—from acting, drawing, composing a new text using the text—that gave me a full understanding of Derrida’s text.”

–Vanessa Woo

“While reading other difficult texts, I found myself thinking of the Pre-Texts seminars and how I could work through and better understand difficult passages. I definitely see how Pre-Texts will be useful in the future as an arts admin/curator/exhibition planner/educator.”

–Laurel Hoffer

Design with Discipline and Punish



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