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ART IN A VACUUM: THE STRUGGLES AND  
REWARDS OF TEACHING LIFE DRAWING  
TO SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE, ESL, FIRST  
GENERATION STUDENTS

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**Art in A Vacuum: The Struggles and Rewards of Teaching Life Drawing to Socially Conservative, ESL, First Generation Students**

**Synopsis:**

This paper will focus on the experience of teaching Art to First Generation ESL students, with a specific emphasis on Life Drawing. I taught Life Drawing in Laredo, Texas for 9 years. The Laredo community is socially conservative, highly religious, and had extremely limited access to the Arts. We will discuss some of the issues that arise in teaching Art within these types of communities and some of the techniques that are most effective in communicating with this demographic.

***Art in A Vacuum: The Challenges and Rewards of Teaching Life Drawing to Socially Conservative, ESL, First Generation Students***

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## **Abstract**

Life Drawing is one of the Foundations courses required for most Visual Arts degrees. It is a traditional study of human anatomy wherein the emphasis lies on acquiring the skills to accurately render human physique from a variety of perspectives. Despite its long history as a requisite course for an Art student, it remains a challenging class for first-generation college students who have no previous experience in a studio or prior education in art history or appreciation. The nude retains both its aura and stigma in socially conservative, religious communities.

Contemporary Life Drawing courses can no longer exist solely as an introduction to the fundamental elements of drawing the human figure. Within rural communities, communities with a majority of ESL students, and with first-generation students, Life Drawing should also encompass Gender Studies, Performance, and Art History. This paper will focus on the challenges and rewards of teaching Life Drawing within a Hispanic community with a primarily first-generation student population. It will explore methods and approaches to communicating how the nude functions in the contemporary art world.

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## Introduction

The study of human anatomy through rendering, or Life Drawing, has been a fundamental part of Studio Art curriculum for hundreds of years. Typical instruction includes observational drawing of the human body through means of a nude model, arranged under artificial light.<sup>1</sup> There has been minimal innovation of life drawing pedagogy in the last five hundred years. The study of life drawing continues to be technique driven, and most drawing instructors neglect to have their students confront the potential conceptual snarls of gender, sexuality, race, and politics inherent in its practice.<sup>2</sup>

Life Drawing has been considered a measure by which both aptitude and even intellectual ability can be measured despite its focus on merely enhancing and developing applied skills.<sup>3</sup> Course objectives for Life Drawing focus on the practical, such as gesture, mark-making, perspective, value, and proportion; or it is simply included as part of a larger schema of lessons, reducing the body to the equivalent of a still life object. Leading academic institutions, such as Virginia Commonwealth University include the study of the figure in their foundations course descriptions as part of a long list of acquired techniques, “an in-depth investigation of line, perspective, the figure, gesture, space, atmosphere, erasure, etc.”<sup>4</sup> There is no mention of

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1. Catherine Whistler.”Life Drawing from Venice to Tiepolo.” *Master Drawings* Vol. 42, No.4 (2004) 370.

2. Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik. “Re-Viewing the Nude.” *Art Journal* Vol. 58, No. 1 (1999) 43.

3. Kana Imuta, Damian Scarf, Henry Pharo, Harlene Hayne. “Drawing a Close to the Use of Human Figure Drawings as a Projective Measure of Intelligence.” *PLOS One* 8 (2013) accessed: August 10, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0058991>

4. Virginia Commonwealth Bulletin. “Art Foundation (ARTF).” <http://bulletin.vcu.edu>. <http://bulletin.vcu.edu/azcourses/artf/> (accessed July 28, 2017).

creating a context or frame within which to understand what it means to draw a person, which is imperative to first-generation students who are more likely to face obstacles in connecting information with meaning, and who are unable to draw from the pool of critical cultural capital in which their continuing-generational peers have been immersed.<sup>5</sup>

First-generation students have been defined as students whose parents have not completed a four-year degree in higher education and have been frequently linked with decreased retention, increased difficulty in graduating within four years, and lower income.<sup>6</sup> During my nine years of teaching Life Drawing in Laredo, Texas at Texas A&M International University, I worked with a student population that was predominantly first-generation, Hispanic, low income, and bilingual or ESL. Laredo is 95.6% Hispanic, the median household income is 39,760 USD (well below the national median), and only 17.6% of the population has achieved a Bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>7</sup> This population has a greater risk of being left behind academically, socially, and economically.<sup>8</sup> It is the obligation of instructors dealing with increasingly diverse populations to re-configure their teaching methods to answer the needs of their students. This paper will focus on how the investigation of gender politics and identity

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5. Jeff Davis. *The First-Generation Student Experience: Implications for Campus Practices, and Strategies for Improving Persistence and Success*. Sterling, VA: Stylus (2012).

6. Ben Galina. "Teaching First-Generation College Students". Cft.vanderbilt.edu. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-first-generation-college-students/> accessed: August 1, 2017.

7. U.S. Census Bureau. "Laredo, Texas Quick Facts." Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/laredocitytexas/PST045216> accessed: July 20, 2017

8. E.T. Pascarella, Pierson, C.T., Wolniak, G.C. and Terenzini, P.T. "First Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes." *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 75 (2004): 276

within the framework of Life Drawing classes can help Hispanic First-Generation students understand and interpret unfamiliar information and lead towards a greater grasp of the social implications of rendering the human figure.

### **Connecting Culture and Life Drawing**

Since art is both the reflection and actualization of culture, it is imperative to recognize and build understanding with the individuals translating and defining culture in their artworks. This can be a struggle for instructors who have not been immersed in the community they are teaching and can result in miscommunication and alienation. In my case, I was estranged from a majority of my female students due to my beliefs about feminism. When I began teaching and asked my students (who were predominantly women) if they considered themselves feminists, I received only negative responses. I was extremely confused and frustrated by what I perceived to be a lack of awareness of social and political issues. My expressed disbelief that these female students, to my mind, were willing to declare themselves undeserving of equal treatment came across as belittling and ultimately disenfranchising, as I learned later from my student comments. My cultural experiences were at odds with the distinct culture emanating from a border region that combines both American and Mexican traditions and belief systems. In this setting, classrooms can similarly find themselves becoming spaces where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34).<sup>9</sup> I was unknowingly using my position to encourage students to accept my belief system without giving them the tools to understand and define their own framework for feminism. As

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9. M. L. Pratt. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Profession*, 91 (1991): 34.

Helgadottir states, “feminism, both as a political movement and as an orientation toward research, has diverse forms and a wide range of positions” (248).<sup>10</sup>

In order to connect with students, it is necessary to recognize one’s own limited comprehension of other cultures and to invite the insights students can bring.<sup>11</sup> Educational researchers have acknowledged that Hispanic/Latino communities have both unique language and practices that are assets within their communities.<sup>12</sup> Initially, I was failing to understand that my female students did not perceive themselves as weak or lesser; rather, they simply did not connect with White vocalizations of feminism.

### **Representation of the Figure**

Students’ diffidence in connecting with the word “Feminist” creates lingering issues which should be solved by connecting contemporary Life Drawing to the history of representation of the figure. There is a responsibility to address the problem that throughout Western Art’s heritage, women as subjects have been victims of sexual exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Students who are Art Majors have been exposed in Art History Surveys to a plethora of examples of the heroic male nude and the lovely submissive or seductive temptress.<sup>14</sup> Frequently, the emphasis in these classes is just to move through the exhaustive catalog of Western Art without placing

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10. Gudrun Helgadottir. “Gender Issues in Art Education.” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, vol 32 n4 (1991): 248.

11. Flavia Bastos. “Border-Crossing Dialogues: Engaging Art Education Students in Cultural Research.” *Art Education* vol 59 no 4(2006): 21.

12. Maria Teresa De La Piedra. “Consejo as a Literary Event: A Case Study of a Border Mexican Woman.” *Language Arts*, vol. 90 n 5(2013): 339.

13. Helgadottir, 248.

14. Whistler, 370.

much emphasis on an analysis of poses and cropping using a feminist lens. We can see examples of these standardized representations of gender lingering in contemporary student artwork today. The standard of strength and perfection was and still is male, whereas representations of women are broader and yet more reductive, making females available in every role possible to fulfill male fantasy and rarely in ones of empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

The “democratization of the art class” to include both female and male students when working with models has not really altered cultural norms of eroticism.<sup>16</sup> The female body continues to be employed as an object of titillation. Student evaluations of my program throughout the years have included comments in the course suggestions section such as, “More hot chicks” and “Less dudes.” These recommendations also were shared publicly by students after models had left for the day. I always strongly discouraged these attitudes which, for the majority of students (primarily women), were distasteful as well. This, however, set up an internal class tension that I did not anticipate. On the one hand, while my class became a safe place for students to discuss and produce work about gender equality and ambiguity, straight identifying male machoism was painted as objectionable, which became prohibitive. I discovered that some of these students felt disconnected and unwelcome because of their lack of so-called liberal leanings. I was creating a structure that was dismissive of some types of identity and, as a result, some of my students were being made to feel disenfranchised. This was the opposite of my intent.

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15. Bostrom and Malik, 45.

16. Bostrom and Malik, 47.

### **Divide Between Culture and Academia**

As early as the 1600s in Venice, nude models were posed in public places for artists to sketch.<sup>17</sup> In 1992, artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena created a performance piece wherein they caged themselves and were on display in order to exhume this practice and notions of cultural anthropology.<sup>18</sup> Bostrom and Malik describe the practice of dehumanizing models in order to reconcile their nudity as the creation of “aesthetic distance.”<sup>19</sup> Within this conventional framework, artists are able to feel aloof from their subject and not concern themselves with the sexual overtones of the practice of Life Drawing. This aesthetic remoteness creates a frame which Eck describes as essential in determining the meaning of a nude.<sup>20</sup> It is particularly difficult for students within socially conservative communities to separate nudes in art from nudes in pornography, especially in contemporary examples wherein artists navigate, explore, and push the boundaries between eroticism, pornography, sexual identity, and exploitation.<sup>21</sup> Most of the students I have worked with, for example, have considered Renaissance paintings generally tasteful but, initially, have had a hard time reconciling their values and expectations with the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. The traditional setting and affirmation that a

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17. Whistler, 384.

18. Anna Johnson. “Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena.” *Bomb: Artists in Conversation*. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1599/> (accessed August 8, 2017).

19. Bostrom and Malik, 43.

20. Beth A. Eck. “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity.” *Sociological Forum* vol. 16, no. 4 (2001): 603.

21. Helgadottir, 249.

conventional art practice provides enables students to arm themselves with a context within which they can safely and comfortably interpret the naked body as an object of study for art.

Although art students have the luxury of broadening their experience and outlook in an academic setting, there is a shift once they bring their work home. Research shows that first-generation students typically are less likely to study for as many hours as their continuing generation peers.<sup>22</sup> This proved true in my experience while teaching Life Drawing. Students who performed well in class had a great deal of difficulty when it came to their homework, often not turning in anything. Lack of time due to outside employment frequently was to blame; first-generation students are more likely to assume financial responsibility for their education.<sup>23</sup> However, students also cited embarrassment as an issue and fear of being caught drawing something which could be perceived by their family as dirty or shameful. This initially caught me off guard. The majority of first-generation students are distinguished by deciding to pursue a college degree in order to help support and bring honor to their parents.<sup>24</sup> A conflict is created when they are uncomfortable sharing what they are working on. As a result, they have greater difficulty finding time to work on their projects at home or enlisting models to help them.

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22. P. Terenzini, Springer, L., Yaeger, P. Pascarella, E. and Nora, A. "First-Generation Collage Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development." *Research in Higher Education* vol.37 (1996): 10.

23. J.E. Aspeleimer, Love, M.M., McGill, L.A., Elliott, A.N., Pierce, T.W. "Self-esteem, Locus of Control, College Adjustment, and GPA Among First- and Continuing Generation Students: A Moderator Model of Generational Status." *Research in Higher Education* vol. 53 (2012):755-781.

24. K. V. T. Bui. "First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experience." *College Student Journal* vol. 36 (2002): 3-11.

A dearth of pre-college art and multicultural experiences, such as visiting museums and art galleries and traveling to other regions, also contributes to low enrollment issues in art classes at schools serving first-generation students. When enrolling for post-secondary education, these students are most likely to have the objectives of personal economic advancement and assisting their families' finances.<sup>25</sup> They do not feel that they or their communities benefit from discussing and evaluating art; nor do they even feel welcome in art classrooms. Accordingly, first-generation students are far less likely to opt for a degree in the fine arts than in business or a technical school.<sup>26</sup> In order to mend this divide, it is important to alter how we transmit information in life drawing classes so that it is not simply information that is delivered one way, but a conversation, and one that is open-ended. Dialogues are successful in crossing cultural chasms when participants "speak with and to, rather than for others."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this type of instruction across all courses is linked with greater student success and retention.<sup>28</sup>

Research shows that retention and graduation rates are highly correlated with the level of education of a student's parents.<sup>29</sup> I was not taking into consideration that, in many communities, education takes place both at school and at home. This informal home education is

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25. Galina.

26. Terenzini et al.

27. A. Scott, Krug, D., and Stuhr, P. "A Conversation About Translating the Indigenous History." *Journal of Multicultural and Cross-cultural Research in Art Education* vol 13 (1995): 45.

28. Walker, 122.

29. Galina.

responsible for instilling the morals, values, and behavioral expectations of their culture.<sup>30</sup> In highly religious communities—like Laredo, which is predominantly Roman Catholic—the human body is controversial.<sup>31</sup> This is true especially amongst older populations. According to Eck, age is one of the identifying factors in terms of the extent of time spent and manner of interpreting the appropriateness of visuals containing nudes.<sup>32</sup> Due to the prevalence of conservatism in terms of the nude, most of my students had not had the opportunity to visit museums or galleries to see examples of Life Drawing prior to enrolling in the course. This foreignness of experience can create further obstacles throughout a first-generation student's college experiences.<sup>33</sup>

### **Educational Experience**

Students with language barriers, either from lack of familiarity with academic jargon or because English is a second language, are apt to feel more vulnerable in settings where they must present in public. In fact, first-generation students are far more likely than their peers to report feelings of anxiety regarding their academic success.<sup>34</sup> On top of learning how to engage within

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30. Valdes, 1996, p 125

31. Home Facts. "Laredo, TX Religion Statistics." Homefacts.com <http://www.homefacts.com/religions/Texas/Webb-County/Laredo.html> (accessed June 30, 2017).

32. Eck, 629.

33. Galina.

34. JuliaA. Martinez, Sher, Kenneth, Krull, Jennifer, and Wood, Philip K. "Blue-Collar Scholars?: Mediators and Moderators of University Attrition in First Generation College Students." *Journal of College of Student Development* vol 50 (2009) accessed: August 10, 2017. doi: [10.1353/csd.0.0053](https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0053)

a new setting, first-generation students may find it particularly difficult to integrate new content and social vocabulary.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, one of the explanations for first-generation students' lack of comparative success at college is due to their typically having little interaction with faculty.<sup>36</sup> While most art classes do involve a great deal of interaction between instructors and students, including demonstrations, critiques, and immediate problem-solving, life drawing classrooms tend to encourage a more solitary learning experience. No doubt this is due largely to the instructor's and students' desire to develop and maintain an objective sense of routine in a room where one person poses nude amongst clothed strangers. As Bostrom and Malik suggest, "professors using the nude follow a tightly scripted set of rules, because they want to avoid potentially embarrassing situations."<sup>37</sup> Although this desire for the comfort of both the model and the students is understandable, it makes it even more essential for instructors to look for opportunities to engage with students and create forums for analysis and discussion. Life Drawing should be, as Cannatella states regarding art education, "more than just activity; it is thoroughness."<sup>38</sup>

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35. Galina.

36. Jennifer Engle. "Postsecondary Access and Success for First-generation College Students." *American Academic* vol 3 no. 1(2007): 34.

37. Bostrom, Malik, 43.

38. Howard Cannatella. "What it is and That it is." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* vol 46, no 2 (2012): 101.

### **Recommendations**

It is broadly accepted that quality educational practices require instructors to meet both student's intellectual and social needs.<sup>39</sup> First-generation students frequently report feelings of disconnection, and poor social integration.<sup>40</sup> Creating a classroom climate wherein all students feel equally prepared to present research in public is essential, and needs to be an ongoing effort; it cannot be achieved overnight. Once students are assured of their success in an assignment, however, perhaps by making the grade a pass/fail based on participation, being given new access to modes of expression is a significant milestone in their academic career. Students who are enabled and encouraged to discover ways of representation that extend farther than their original expectations of what it means to work with the body are able to connect to modern and contemporary art in ways that hitherto were unavailable. It becomes tangible whereas previously they might not have had the pre-college educational resources to comprehend or assimilate it.<sup>41</sup>

Research has shown repeatedly that the value and benefit of participating in a specific course is derived from the quality of the delivery of instruction as well as the professor's relationship with their students.<sup>42</sup> Performance art is very much a trust-based exercise wherein the teacher and students must rely on a progressive and open class dynamic to encourage sincere and insightful expression. Showing the students examples of performance art that utilizes the body expands the content area of Life Drawing to include an entirely new ethical framework.

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39. Walker, 123.

40 Galina.

41. Ibid.

42 Joan M. T. Walker. "Authoritative Classroom Management: How Control and Nurturance Work Together." *Theory Into Practice* vol. 48, no. 2 (2009):122.

Male students who previously had elected to depict female bodies solely in over-sexualized and provocative poses were not able to rely on these social masks. It has been hypothesized that first-generation college students are less likely to perform well at college because they have diminished academic self-concepts.<sup>43</sup> A desire to promote images connected with male sexual viability sometimes can cover up an underlying fear of not knowing what to do or what to make in order to succeed in class. Research shows that fear of poor academic performance contributes to negative results.<sup>44</sup> My goal as an instructor when requiring my life drawing students to create one performance art piece is to boost their confidence levels by giving them a different avenue in which they potentially could succeed. Osborne and Jones affirm that interventions that challenge first-generation students in course material, while encouraging their academic success, will facilitate greater success throughout their college career.<sup>45</sup>

Performance, especially for the novice, requires a more internal review of what one hopes to communicate in one's artwork. Additionally, when students are aware that their turn to perform is nearing, respect and attention are facilitated easily. Some of the most rewarding classroom discussions that I have engaged in have been the result of a student's first performance work. Due to the ephemeral nature of performance and a class rule restricting all recording,

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43. Stacie Craft De Freitas and Anne Rinn. "Academic Achievement in First-Generation College Students: The Role of Academic Self-Concept." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* vol. 13, no. 1 (2013):57.

44. M. Vuong, Brown-Welty, S. and Tracz, S. "The Effects of Self-efficacy on Academic Success of First-Generation College Sophomore Students." *Journal of College Student Development* vol 51 no 1(2010): 52.

45. J.W. Osborne and B.D. Jones. "Identification with Academics and Motivation to Achieve in School: How the Structure of the Self influences Academic Outcomes." *Educational Psychology Review* vol 23 no 1 (2011): 131-158.

students have been able to present concepts that they did not feel comfortable putting down on paper or canvas. Creating spaces where students can dialogue openly, “allows for disclosure of personal biases, and enables the correction and negotiation of meanings.”<sup>46</sup>

If students’ social networks are not embracing of the arts and aware of the nude’s place in traditional art education, it can be difficult finding models who are willing to pose nude, without any sexual agenda. The young men I have worked with are more likely to have a female friend send them a nude photo through their phones. Given the sexually explicit intent of the exchange, it makes the framework of classifying nudes more challenging.

One solution for the lack of access to models is to encourage students to work on self-portraits. In my experience, female students have been much more open and likely to pursue self-portraits. This may be a result of their habitual self-objectification, whether through social media or even daily life. However, while self-portraits eliminate the aesthetic distance, they can result, consciously or not, in an airbrushing of flaws. Millennial students are a part of a selfie generation with a myriad of filters at their fingertips designed to eliminate any flaw. This beautification does have a grounding in history since some old masters thought it the responsibility of the artist to augment or de-emphasize body parts that were not perceived as pleasing to the eye.<sup>47</sup> Contemporary examples tend to eschew these visual fibs however, unless for the purpose of satire; note the paintings created by John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage.

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46. Bastios, 24.

47. Whistler, 378.

Students who are encouraged to research female artists who work with the figure become aware of how representation can shift and appropriate stereotypes. One successful exercise I have employed is having students work in groups to recreate historical poses in order to spark discussions of why certain poses are perceived as gender specific. Exploring the power structures within compositions help students to understand the implicit meaning created by how one arranges a figure. Additionally, students are able to empathize with the experience of the model which extends to a de-objectification of the body.

As it turns out, the term “gender studies” resonates on a less political, and therefore more palatable level for students, despite its being rooted in feminist research.<sup>48</sup> By working with students to identify strong examples of artists championing gender equality within overlooked and underrepresented populations, the classroom becomes a site of effective dialogue, and subsequently, stronger artwork is produced. It is necessary, therefore, to include discussions of gender politics within Life Drawing. Creating a focus, not only on technique but also on conversation, creates classroom relationships that can bring clarity and definition to interpretations.

### **Conclusion**

Social constructs, gender, and identity are essential considerations when analyzing and critiquing art work. As such, they become “mainstream concerns in today’s art education.”<sup>49</sup> This is true especially of Life Drawing which inherently encompasses these complex and politicized issues. To ignore them while teaching and to simply continue to treat Life Drawing

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48. Helgadottir, 248.

49. Ibid, 249.

as a foundational class wherein you acquire craft-based skills is to have an incomplete curriculum and to do a disservice to contemporary student populations whose diverse demographics require a more thorough and sensitive approach. Ideally, all art courses should oblige students to examine social and political issues from multiple points of view, on both a regional and global level. Life drawing courses should enable the same kinds of investigation, with a particular emphasis on enabling singular voices to join in the dialogue.

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