



Faculty Review of Open eTextbooks

The [California Open Educational Resources Council](#) has designed and implemented a faculty review process of the free and open etextbooks showcased within the California Open Online Library for Education (www.cool4ed.org). Faculty from the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California were invited to review the selected free and open etextbooks using a rubric. Faculty received a stipend for their efforts and funding was provided by the State of California, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Textbook Name:

Khan Academy SmartHistory: Art History



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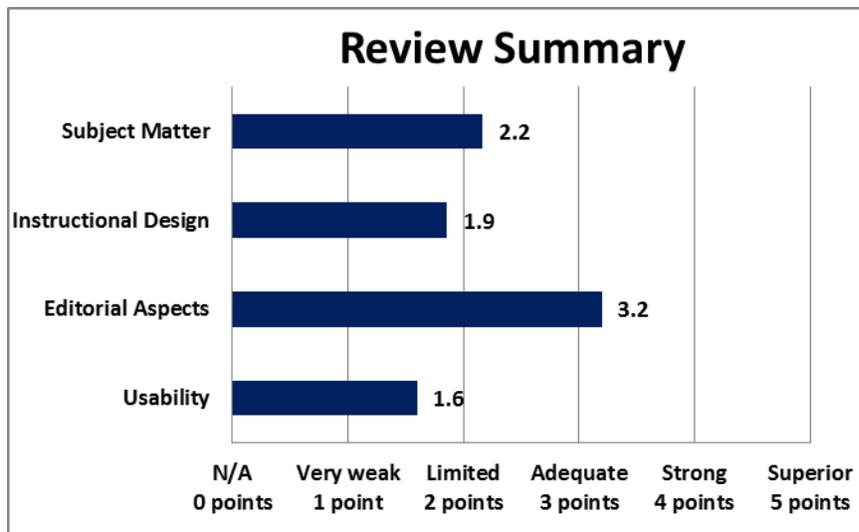
Professor

Format

Reviewed:

[Online](#)

A small fee may be associated with various formats.



Date Reviewed:

March 2015

California OER Council eTextbook Evaluation Rubric

CA Course ID: [ARTH 120](#)

Subject Matter (30 possible points) 10 pt	N/A (0 pts)	Very Weak (1pt)	Limited (2 pts)	Adequate (3pts)	Strong (4 pts)	Superior (5 pts)
Is the content accurate, error-free, and unbiased?			X			
Does the text adequately cover the designated course with a sufficient degree of depth and scope?			X			
Does the textbook use sufficient and relevant examples to present its subject matter?			X			

Does the textbook use a clear, consistent terminology to present its subject matter?			X			
Does the textbook reflect current knowledge of the subject matter?			X			
Does the textbook present its subject matter in a culturally sensitive manner? (e.g. Is the textbook free of offensive and insensitive examples? Does it include examples that are inclusive of a variety of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds?)				X		

Total Points: 13 out of 30

Please provide comments on any aspect of the subject matter of this textbook:

- The Khan Academy Smarthistory announces its goals clearly and early on. It is to be “relatable,” and this appears to make subject matter an interesting issue. Some sections are very good, with clear, factual articles supported by thoughtfully selected sets of images and links to legitimate sources. See, for example, the comprehensive section on Futurism and its many links to relevant supporting information. “Warhol, Marilyn Diptych” provides a bibliography of five items, four of which are the leading scholarly accounts of the work; the fifth links to the work’s page at the Tate. That said, a surprisingly large number of topics lack extended narratives, and of these few present citations or bibliographies of standard and authoritative texts. Where does the data come from, and shouldn’t a textbook model the same attention to citation required of student research papers?
- Other sections seem to conflate historic art production and reception with their contemporary counterparts, and many present the past through a lens derived from popular culture and tourist interests. Some are tightly focused on one or a few aspects of their topics, an approach that both neglects contextual issues and precludes adequate preparation for later discussions. The example of Chinese art of illuminates general tendencies as they affect the overall project. The introduction to “Imperial China” consists largely of a two-sentence preface introducing (but not defining) Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. This is followed by a lengthy discussion of the burial site of Qin Shihuang, a link to a video of a modern calligraphy master, and another that urges users to “Try your hand at brushpainting in this digital interactive”. This is rather great, but it would be useful to have this information more clearly connected to early Imperial China. Much of the balance covering Chinese art is cursory. The Later Zhao is represented by a single 2:03min video on the earliest known inscribed sculpture of the Buddha, a discussion that is both highly specialized and so wholly focused on the object that its scope doesn’t extend to other accomplishments of the period or to the period itself. Questionable and poorly-written statements appear as well; e.g., “Buddhism, born in India, was transmitted to China...”. The vast majority consists of short videos with little written narrative or other clear connection established between components.
- Other typical sections present unusual choices and limited and often inappropriate discussions. For example, the “Early Victorian: Modernity in the guise of history” is introduced with “Introductory Link: Victorian: A Tribute to Home, Hearth and Hounds.” A double portrait by English animal painter Sir Edwin Henry Landseer ostensible introduces Queen Victoria to frame the Victorian era. What appears in the text, however, is a long discussion of “the most relatable Landseer artworks [which] to our modern eye are those which depict the enduring relationship between the royal family and their dogs, a love affair which many modern pet owners can relate to. [Landseer’s painting] Windsor Castle in Modern Times presents such a scene and, as such, acts as a window into which we can explore both our love of Landseer and of dogs.” That this is offered in lieu of other, actually significant figures, works and, ultimately, facts seems a strange decision. That supporting information appears in the form of a link to a blog is another.
- A major shortcoming of the Smarthistory format is its reliance on short videos narrated by the same two narrators and rarely rising above formalist description and simple statements of affective response. This approach is announced in the Teachers’ resources section, “The skill of describing”: “Throughout the class, you will hear videos of art historians or narrators discussing works of art. Often, they will carefully describe what they see. In fact, slow, careful looking and describing are fundamental to understanding a work of art. Listen to this “visual description” from the Museum of Modern Art for people who are blind or partially sighted. Could you see the work of art in your mind’s eye by the end? (Here’s the painting in the visual description—but listen before you look!)”. The problem here is that many videos consist of

description and comments such as “she looks stern” and “pretty wild outfit for him to be wearing”. Not only do the videos under discussion feature artwork which all possess a readily available and extensive scholarship, and it would be nice to have more generally useful content in these videos. But also artistic formalism --a methodology based on exacting description of form and color-- long gave way to other methodologies, and subjective experience is useful to the extent that most courses require arts experience and formal analysis papers. To make formalism the default methodology is to limit the more complex discussion of context, intent, reception, use and other approaches used in college and university art history courses. It is also a major shortcoming for a textbook intended to support the college and university study of the history of art at introductory and advanced levels. To state this more clearly, few art history courses accept descriptions of works as satisfactory answers to exam questions. In this the Smarthistory falls short of current practice

Instructional Design (35 possible points)	N/A (0 pts)	Very Weak (1pt)	Limited (2 pts)	Adequate (3pts)	Strong (4 pts)	Superior (5 pts)
Does the textbook present its subject materials at appropriate reading levels for undergrad use?				X		
Does the textbook reflect a consideration of different learning styles? (e.g. visual, textual?)				X		
Does the textbook present explicit learning outcomes aligned with the course and curriculum?			X			
Is a coherent organization of the textbook evident to the reader/student?				X		
Does the textbook reflect best practices in the instruction of the designated course?		X				
Does the textbook contain sufficient effective ancillary materials? (e.g. test banks, individual and/or group activities or exercises, pedagogical apparatus, etc.)		X				
Is the textbook searchable?	X					

Total Points: 13 out of 35

Please provide comments on any aspect of the instructional design of this textbook:

- The Smarthistory is uneven in terms of coverage, continuity, and choice of elements. Some sections include lengthy narratives that present historical context, factors of use, biographical information, terms, and other highly relevant information directly related to the practice and teaching of art history. Other sections consist of short videos largely dominated by a specialist’s focus on a single work or, conversely, lengthy formal analyses many students confuse with actual content of the sort that gains credit on exams. It often seems that the goal of being “relatable” precludes sustained or in-depth content. Experience teaching with and evaluating instructor-compiled readers has shown that few students do well with resources they consider inconsistent or presenting sections of disparate quality, approach, or expectations. For example, the gaps between studying the international and interwar style Dada through five videos sits uneasily against the extensive coverage given the seven Pre-Raphaelites, a group many art history courses omit. This is not an answer to different styles of learning; it is an inadequate thinking through of the multiple and intersecting requirements of a successful textbook. Even without this, the overall emphasis on artistic formalism goes against best practices of the discipline it is intended to serve.

Editorial Aspects (25 possible points)	N/A (0 pts)	Very Weak (1pt)	Limited (2 pts)	Adequate (3pts)	Strong (4 pts)	Superior (5 pts)
Is the language of the textbook free of grammatical, spelling, usage, and typographical errors?				X		
Is the textbook written in a clear, engaging style?				X		
Does the textbook adhere to effective principles of design? (e.g. are pages laid out and organized to be clear and visually engaging and effective? Are colors, font, and typography consistent and unified?)						X
Does the textbook include conventional editorial features? (e.g. a table of contents, glossary, citations and further references)			X			
How effective are multimedia elements of the textbook? (e.g. graphics, animations, audio)				X		

Total Points: 16 out of 25

Please provide comments on any editorial aspect of this textbook.

- The Smarthistory presents good editorial decisions. With the exception of navigating between sections, the majority is clearly laid out and easy to navigate. The _appearance_ is unified, consistent, and gives the impression of a cohesive product. Sections limited to multiple links to videos are weak in that there is little continuity in and between sections. That said, sections such as that on Futurism make very effective use of appropriately selected and placed videos. A consistent, continuous editorial voice and a more rigorous embrace of fact and scholarship beyond formalism would be welcome, as would the total abandonment of the user-provided Q&A sections that conclude each topic.

Usability (30 possible points)	N/A (0 pts)	Very Weak (1pt)	Limited (2 pts)	Adequate (3pts)	Strong (4 pts)	Superior (5 pts)
Is the textbook compatible with standard and commonly available hardware/software in college/university campus student computer labs?					X	
Is the textbook accessible in a variety of different electronic formats? (e.g. .txt, .pdf, .epub, etc.)	X					
Can the textbook be printed easily?	X					
Does the user interface implicitly inform the reader how to interact with and navigate the textbook?					X	
How easily can the textbook be annotated by students and instructors?	X					

Total Points: 8 out of 30

Please provide comments on any aspect of access concerning this textbook.

- With the exception of navigating between sections, the work is laid out clearly and easy to navigate. It would be nice to have a better format for the quizzes (and better attention to the phrasing and content of questions) such that one could opt to answer all questions at once. The hints offered in the quizzes seem counterproductive to learning in that they offer answers.

Overall Ratings	Not at all (0 pts)	Very Weak (1 pt)	Limited (2 pts)	Adequate (3 pts)	Strong (4 pts)	Superior (5 pts)
What is your overall impression of the textbook?			X			
	Not at all (0 pts)	Strong reservations (1 pt)	Limited willingness (2 pts)	Willing (3 pts)	Strongly willing (4 pts)	Enthusiastically willing (5 pts)
How willing would you be to adopt this book?	X					

Total Points: 2 out of 10

Overall Comments

If you were to recommend this textbook to colleagues, what merits of the textbook would you highlight?

- The Smarthistory makes it easy to locate appropriate video clips from legitimate sources such as the MoMA and other museums. In lieu of source citations, evidence of peer review, or other standards of academic scholarship, however, it is difficult to recommend large portions of this work for use in a college or university classroom.

What areas of this textbook require improvement in order for it to be used in your courses?

- The format and possibilities of Smarthistory are very intriguing, and much of it suggests the advantages of a fully realized electronic textbook. For now, a decision to use a resource of this type would be based on its relevant content, clear acknowledgement of source materials, peer review, and all other standards of academic publishing. These standards are demonstrated by the three leading art history textbooks, and it a valid replacement at the very least needs to present them in addition to innovation, no matter how "relatable" or inexpensive it may be. An academic textbook should at the very least incorporate the standard methodologies, formats, and language of its discipline. As a colleague points out, no one would sanction training physicians using medical textbooks compiled from Wikipedia, blogs, and open source video clips, or rely on a Q&A section wherein answers are provided by the general public and appear in the

ranked order determined by how true each strikes users. (What, precisely, makes an answer with 16 votes more factually accurate than one with 15?) It seems logical that statements identified as content or “answers” in an art history textbook should use fact derived from peer-reviewed art historical scholarship; this is, after all, a basic requirement for student papers. These issues, and content would need improvement.

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