

# Using co-authored Learning Agreements when teaching challenging subject matter: a case-study from History of Art

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## Introduction

This article evaluates the benefits of using learning agreements, co-authored by lecturers and students, when teaching challenging subject matter. It centres on a case-study from my own experience teaching a History of Art module, demonstrating how co-authored learning agreements can help to scaffold student's critical engagement with visually graphic source material. A co-authored learning agreement (sometimes called a 'learning contract') is a set of principles or directives agreed upon by students and lecturers through equitable negotiation, that will govern how a class or course is taught, and how students will engage with this teaching (Anderson, Boud and Samson, 1996/2014). In the following sections, I outline how to develop a co-authored learning agreement and discuss the pedagogic rationale of using this method. I then evaluate its efficacy through analysis of a student feedback survey (a tailored version of the College of Arts and Law's student module feedback form, with a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions) from a class sample size of 14 students. I conclude by situating the learning-agreement method within the wider context of affirmative learning environments.

Discussion of co-authored learning agreements remains a nascent topic in higher education (HE) pedagogy, with the majority of recent scholarship focusing on their role in blended and online study (e.g. Morrisey, Savage and Compton-Daw, 2020; Morgado, Pereira, and Quintas-Mendes, 2008). Moving beyond this context, I attend to their application in HE within the field of trauma and memory studies. Overall, I argue that co-authored learning agreements empower students and foster independent learning, encourage lecturers to reflect critically on their own practice, and help to create affirmative, equitable learning environments by respecting the individual needs and experiences of all participants.

**Developing co-authored learning agreements**

As the name indicates, a co-authored learning agreement is designed and agreed upon jointly by students and lecturers (Anderson, Boud and Samson, 2014). It is intended to frame the way a class, course or programme is taught, and guide how students and lecturers engage with the learning material and each other. It covers both modes and methods of teaching delivery, and student and lecturer behaviours and responsibilities. This means that students and lecturers should both share the responsibility for developing the agreement. Given the potential for unequal power dynamics between students and lecturers (Symonds, 2020), it is important that the agreement is designed within an inclusive environment and through a process of open discussion. As this requires a significant degree of trust, as well as a shared understanding of subject and teaching methods, it is necessary to scaffold the process by providing students with contextual material in advance. This material will include information regarding the concept and aims of developing a learning agreement (where this is new to the students), as well as information about the class/course content and available teaching methods. It is a key criterion of co-authored learning agreements that they serve the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of a given class, course or programme, so this information needs to be clear to all participants at the start of the process. A virtual learning platform (VLE) can be used to share this information: providing this material to students before class will give them the time to process and think through the reasoning and possibilities of the learning agreement with regard to the course/class subject matter and ILOs. This is an important early indication of how the learning agreement can engage students in critical thinking.

Students should then be given an opportunity to respond, and to suggest what they would like to see covered in the learning agreement. This may include requests for particular teaching methods, guidelines for how to engage with different types of material, and suggested ways to participate in class. The lecturer should also reflect on their own approach in discussion with the students, thus emphasising the equity of the discussion. It is important to note that the learning agreement does not need to dictate course content, rather the focus should be on developing guidance for how content is engaged with. Open discussion about the learning agreement can happen in a flipped classroom, in group

debate, and with an additional opportunity for anonymous online discussion. The important issue is that students feel able to freely express themselves, so it is necessary to provide multiple fora in which students can share their views, including anonymous options. Once the principles of the learning agreement are drafted, it should be reviewed by all participants, with ongoing opportunities for evaluation and update. It should be openly available throughout the duration of the class/course and signposted at appropriate times. It is good practice in terms of fostering independent learning to encourage students to take responsibility for both activities.

### **Case study: Image as Witness**

My own experience with co-authored learning agreements came with teaching an History of Art module, 'Image as Witness', to BA finalists and MA students. This was an optional module of my own design, taught through a combination of weekly lectures, seminars and student presentations. The core questions posed by the module included: how accurately can images bear witness to the world and our experiences of it, good and bad? Are there any experiences that the image cannot accommodate or represent? What moral obligation does this visual testimony place on viewers, if any? This subject matter was developed to align with the module learning outcomes, which stated that over the course of the module, students must: demonstrate a detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the module's taught content; describe relationships between relevant artworks and cultural/theoretical contexts; and identify, analyse and compare relevant artworks produced during the period covered by the module.

The module involved analysis of graphic images of violence, sexual violence, wounding and death throughout, as an essential component of the intellectual exploration of images' power to witness. Figure 1 is one such example: plate 3 from Goya's *Disasters of War* depicts violence, pain and death in abject detail; other plates from this series explicitly represent bodily wounding, torture and rape. Students needed to be prepared to look closely at such difficult images and discuss in detail the challenging historical and theoretical issues attending them. This was obviously a big ask for two main reasons: first, this material evidently has the potential to be quite distressing; second, the module asked for students to push their critical abilities and apply these within an ethical and intellectual framework that

I knew was not familiar to them. This is where a co-authored learning agreement became necessary, to ensure that students fully understood the content and intellectual aims of the module in advance, and that I understood what students felt they would need in order to engage successfully with this topic.

I used a flipped classroom in the first lecture. Having used the VLE to summarise the module's key topics and ILOs in advance, and provided set reading on pedagogies of testimony, I first asked my students to reflect on a series of questions about their learning goals. Example questions included:

- What do you want to learn from this course?
- What sort of learning activities would be useful to help you engage academically with difficult images?
- Should any subject or type of image be off-limits?
- Do we want some sort of code-of-conduct for student presentations?
- What will we do if anyone finds a particular image/s very upsetting?

Following this in-class discussion, we jointly agreed a set of guidelines about class content and behaviours, and the students nominated two of their peers to write these up and send them to me for upload to our VLE. These principles remained in place throughout the module, students could check on them at any time, they were sign-posted towards them when they had to prepare their presentations, and there was an opportunity to review them in weeks 2 and 7. Example principles from this agreement include:

- No images or subjects are off-limits, but there must be a strong and clearly articulated educational rationale for why we need to talk about/ look at something, directly related to the key questions for that week.
- Lecture and seminar slides will be uploaded at least 5 days before class.
- It is everyone's personal responsibility to check the content of a reading/lecture/seminar/presentation **before** coming to class.

### **Pedagogic rationale**

I used co-authored learning agreements in this course in order to realise a number of pedagogic and pastoral goals. The intellectual basis for the module was Susan Sontag's theories about the ethical problems posed by images of war, that:

“Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it...or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether we like it or not. In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look.” (Sontag, 2002, p.89).

Drawing on this, I aimed to get students thinking about their own agency in selecting, looking at and analysing a range of complex images. My goals were to foster independent learning, and create an affirmative, equitable learning environment that supports and encourages critical engagement and independent thought. By these means, I intended that students would be able to meet the skills-based and intellectual goals identified in the module's ILOs, which included developing detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the subject, and the ability to critically analyse source material. Finally, given the often-explicit nature of the material I would be presenting, I was aware that there were pastoral implications: the images we looked at had the potential to be emotionally challenging. It is not my role as a lecturer to engage in detailed pastoral intervention, but I did need to address the possibility that wellbeing issues would arise, so I aimed in my course design to respect individual learners and try to make sure all students were included and are able to participate. The three main devices I used were the learning agreement, content notes, and regular signposting towards pastoral provision within the School and College.

### **Evaluation**

I elicited feedback from my students about their views on how the learning agreement worked, as well as their perception of the learning they engaged in during the module as a whole. This was done by means of an anonymous online student feedback form, comprised of qualitative and quantitative questions drawn from the College of Arts and Law's standard student module feedback template, and the data presented here is from a sample class size of 14. Students were asked to indicate their consent if they were happy for their responses being shared in publication. A note of caution: this module has only been taught once so far, to a small group of students who opted to take it, and who, as BA finalists and MA students,

had already developed a good degree of confidence in managing their own learning: the feedback thus represents the views of a select group. Having said this, this evaluation has elicited deep, if not broad, feedback and the results showed a strong, positive response to the use of learning agreements. Quantitative feedback was sought about whether students “found it useful to agree a code-of-conduct [learning agreement] at the start of the module”, and 100% of respondents answered with “agree”/ “strongly agree”. This correlated with two other pieces of quantitative feedback (Figure 2): 100% of students agreed that “the teaching methods on the module helped them learn” and likewise 100% of students agreed that their “understanding of the subject has increased as a result of taking the module”.

Qualitative feedback provided additional evidence that the learning agreement was fulfilling two clear functions, one to do with educational experience and the other to do with their learning. The following are examples of qualitative statements from the student feedback about the learning agreement:

“Was helpful in setting an intention of keeping a safe space where if anyone is affected by the content that they feel validated in setting boundaries when in the education setting.”

“In this module, there have definitely been some images and material that can be disturbing. Making sure before the module started that everyone understood that every individual would have a different tolerance toward explicit content and that we have to be respectful and thoughtful was crucial.”

“Is useful, it defines the scope of our research and what to do.”

“Helped me to understand the importance of justifying my use of imagery.”

This feedback showed that the agreement both helped to make the educational experience feel inclusive and respectful and also helped students to develop their skills and knowledge, in particular around establishing a rationale for referencing and critiquing visual sources. The positive response of students here matched my own appreciation of the co-authored learning agreement as a tool for both skills development and inclusion. As a lecturer, the learning agreement enabled me to refine my approach so as to better meet student needs and expectations when working towards the module ILOs. It also provided me with a sense

of security and confidence, that I was doing my best to meet the ethical and pastoral aspects of my role.

### **Affirmative learning environments**

In this article, I advocate for using co-authored learning agreements to create affirmative learning environments. I have demonstrated their role in scaffolding student engagement with explicit visual material in the context of the humanities. Challenging and explicit material can be difficult to encounter, both emotionally and intellectually, and has the potential to be “triggering” for some learners (Dufree and Rosenberg, 2009; Marciniak, 2010; Rodier, *Meagher and Nixon*, 2013). Scholarship from the field of memory and trauma studies has asserted the importance of creating “safe” or “affirmative” learning environments to scaffold student engagement with challenging material. While I remain sceptical that one can guarantee a classroom will be emotionally or ethically “safe” when studying challenging material (Sleigh, 2023), I do concur that an affirmative learning environment is important. Students need to be a) recognised and respected as individual learners with their own intellectual agency, and b) supported to engage with the material in question in an appropriate analytical way. Co-authored learning agreements can be paired with other inclusive methods in order to create affirmative learning environments. Used in tandem with devices such as content notes and flipped classrooms (Hatchwell, 2023; Ray, 2020), they can scaffold appropriate academic engagement with important but potentially difficult topics, in a manner that is accessible to a diverse range of learners. Learning agreements encourage students to reflect critically on the material they are being presented with, on the learning outcomes they are aiming towards, and the learning methods they are using. They are supported to become active participants in the learning experience, making conscious choices about how and why they engage with content or learning processes.

Learning agreements remain an emergent topic in HE pedagogy. Initial discussion in the 1980s and 90s looked at the constructive role they might play in promoting student accountability within the learning dynamic (Knowles, 1986; Laycock and Stephenson, 1993). More recent studies have focused on their use in this regard in online and blended learning (Morrisey, Savage and Compton-Daw, 2020; Morgado, Pereira, and Quintas-Mendes, 2008). In this context, they perform a regulatory function, guiding students’ independent learning and online participation. Further scholarship has considered the role learning agreements

can play in fostering teamwork and encouraging student responsibility as part of the development of positive learning environments (Barkley, Major and Cross, 2014; Ellerbrock, 2014). A differing perspective on their function emerges in feminist scholarship and legal and conflict studies: these approaches have considered the ways in which learning agreements can address some of the pastoral and/or ethical issues that arise when teaching challenging subject matter (Lawrence, 2014; Rothman, 2014). Through my own experience, I have found that learning agreements are able to encompass a dual function, both constructive and ethical. Drawing together the branches of scholarship identified above, I contend they can help to bridge the constructive learning goals of a course with the ethical and pastoral demands of engaging with challenging content. I argue they are therefore of specific use within the field of memory and trauma studies in the humanities, and in particular, that they align with the sorts of values and approaches advocated by the critical pedagogy movement (Seal and Mayo, 2021; Coy, 2014). The critical pedagogy movement attends to issues around power relations within education, and the need to develop democratic learning environments which recognise students as individuals. These principles mirror the pedagogic aims and functions of the learning agreement in a HE setting: to help foster independent learning and drive critical thinking. The use of co-authored learning agreements can thus be seen as part of a wider project of developing equitable, inclusive and ethically aware learning experiences. Such experiences meet the intended outcomes of HE degree programmes in terms of fostering independence, self-regulation, and criticality.

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**Supplementary information (illustration):**

**Figure 1**

Francisco de Goya, *Lo Mismo* (*The same*), Plate 3 of *Los Desastres de La Guerra* (*The Disasters of War*) (Harris No. 123 III) (1863-92), etching, Scottish National Gallery, purchased 1967, accession number 2704.21. Creative Commons CC by NC.



**Figure 2**

“Image as Witness” Student Feedback Form (2022), quantitative question responses, sample class size of 14, responses collected anonymously via MS Forms.

