

CTTL Try-It Grant: Summer Preparation Report  
AAM222/ARTH222: African-American Art  
Olubukola A. Gbadegesin

**The Plan:**

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Over the past two years, I have worked at improving the African American Art course with various techniques of encouraging deep learning experience with reflective writing assignments and off-campus museum/gallery visits. In spite of the relative success of these efforts, students still did not get the kind of direct, participatory exposure that allowed them to actively use and interrogate learned, abstracted academic knowledge in an immediate, local, experiential space. I hoped that adding a field-service learning component to the course would go a long way towards facilitating this deeper level of engaged learning.

I reached out to local organizations in order to build on in-class learning and expose students to the visual history of African-American experiences and social justice activities in Saint Louis. I approached two different organizations—the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS) and GYA/Yeyo Arts Collective—to work with students on specific projects that not only benefit these organizations but also impart some level of historical and present significance about how the work that they do shapes and is shaped by St. Louis and its residents. Both organizations are geographically close to SLU, which makes them all the more appealing as allies for this kind of field-service learning proposal.

OBS has been advocating and organizing for a society “free of all forms of exploitation and oppression” since it was founded in 1980 by activists, students, union organizers and other community members. Initially, students were expected to sort, organize, scan, and make a banner from the visual records of OBS activities in St. Louis since their founding (including but not limited to photographs, audio-visuals, and illustrated/printed papers) and also digitize the organization’s outdated video collection. However, mid-semester, the organizational partner requested that instead of a banner, the students establish an online presence for the images (Wikimedia.com) and videos (youtube.com) which could be built upon over time.

Though found more recently in 2009, GYA/YEYO is an African-American arts collective committed to engaging community issues through a visual arts lens aimed at visually and ideologically empowering young black youth and transforming the greater St. Louis area. At GYA/YEYO, students were originally slated to work with collective members to apply for grants, organize artist talks, community teaching projects, and the collective’s exhibition space. In the end, the students were tasked with creating a visual banner and a video short about the organization.

Students met with their organizations every other Friday during class time. At this time, they were introduced to the materials and assigned particular tasks, which they were given another two weeks to complete. The syllabus was hugely revamped so that the grading rubric reflected the new field service learning component. In order to better integrate these field service experiences with in-class coursework, students completed 3-4pp journal entries every two weeks that synthesized the discussions taking place in and out of the classroom. These assignments made up the bulk of the in-semester coursework that the students were graded on. Students were also graded on their final projects with the organizations, and the community liaisons provided input about students’ overall engagement with the experience.

## The Semester:

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There were 16 undergraduates enrolled in the course, including 3 majors and minors but the majority of students were interested in fulfilling Fine Arts and US Diversity requirements. The project was explained on the first day and the organizational representatives were introduced in the second week of classes. At the beginning of the third week, students chose the organizations that they wanted to work with and further chose to work with the “Picture Group” versus “Video Group” in these organizations.

Logistics: It felt that it necessary, though it was impossible, for me to be present at the field service meetings for both organizations. My presence was the best way to assess the success of the sessions and the progress of each group over the semester. However, because there was only one student driver in the GYA/Yeyo group (7 students), I had to accompany that group, as a driver, for most of their off-campus sessions. There were enough student drivers in the OBS group but the long transportation time between campus and the site became such an issue that we decided to move those meetings to campus. There are two potential resolutions: a) by developing better lead-up and debrief practices with each organizational liaison I may not need to be present at each meeting (see “Content” section), or b) I may need to consider only working with one organization.

Also, many of the students were athletes, or worked multiple jobs, or were simply overscheduled. These time constraints made it difficult for students to spend any extra-class time on-site with the organizations, or do the scanning/video conversion work. This was an unanticipated (and seemingly insurmountable) obstacle that I am not sure how to address.

Content: The field service component was not as well-integrated with the in-class materials as it could have been, so students had a difficult time understanding the more nuanced links between the coursework and field service. This was in part because the field service was presented very early in the course so students were not fully familiar with the premise/fundamentals of the course topic before being asked to apply it in a field service context. Also, without first-hand knowledge of class lectures/readings, the organizational liaisons had a difficult time connecting field service with class work.

- In the future, I will make a concerted effort to suggest possible points of emphasis or overlap to the liaisons, based on my in-class lectures. I will also work with them to develop lesson plans for each of their meetings with students.

The project descriptions, bi-weekly assignments, deadlines, and informational materials were not as well-defined or formally presented as they could have been. These meetings were casual and students seemed to prefer more structured, lecture-style presentations.

- Some of these issues will be resolved by working closer with liaisons to develop lesson plans. However, it is also important that the weekly objectives, assignments and deadlines be clearly communicated to students so handouts need to be more deliberately used.

Although, I drafted schedules with liaisons before the semester began, I discovered that the liaisons did not clearly present these schedules to the students and I also neglected to monitor these schedules during the semester. It became increasingly difficult to supervise both field service groups and my own class efforts as the semester progressed: it was like teaching three courses.

- In retrospect, the field service component may be more manageable if it occurred over a shorter time period during the course, perhaps every Friday over a four week period.

Over the course of the semester, it was clear that the amount of work (readings, field service trips, and assignments) was too much for a 200 level course and students were completing some assignments but not others. There are a couple of remedies to this issue;

- Limit the field service component of the course to four weeks, cut the number of course readings/ assignments, and develop more dynamic field service projects, or
- Make the field service component a new class altogether with more potential for in-depth analysis.

Projects: Initially, OBS requested that students create a visual banner but, it became clear by mid-semester that there was a miscommunication with students. So, instead, students agreed to establish an online presence for the images (Wikimedia.com). Similarly, the video conversion group created a Youtube page for the organization and uploaded a few of the older converted video onto it. Although, I was hopeful that students working with GYA/Yeyo would be able to help with programming, it was clearly more feasible to have them complete a visual banner and a short original video clip on the organization.

- Initially, I did not expect that I would have to monitor the organizational liaisons too closely, but it became clear that would be the case. Even after our summer planning conversations, there were a few things that slipped through the cracks.

Students were encouraged to interact with organization members (aside from our liaison) as they completed their projects, but because both sites had unusual operating hours and students had transportation and time constraints, students largely interacted with our one primary liaison.

- Need to be more deliberate in making sure other collective members are present by scheduling them explicitly.

The projects were successfully completed and well-received by the organizations. I had students complete an informal end of year assessment of the course which I can make available.

Technology: Using the IMC worked well although the tech-related tasks—picture scanning, video conversion, etc.—eventually became monotonous for students. Moreover, the video conversion group experienced technical difficulties with their project early on in a way that impacted their subsequent engagement with the project. The laptop and scanner assigned to OBS came in very handy during the few on-site visits and the subsequent on-campus visits. The hard drives also worked very well—one was held at the IMC front desk for students to check-in/out and the other was held by OBS.

### **The Future:**

After this first offering of the course, it is clear that it requires a great deal more work than is appropriate for a 200-level course. In the future, I would like to implement one of two options:

- a) Keep the field service component in the course. Limit the field service component of the course to four weeks. Cut the number of assigned course readings, and develop more dynamic field service projects.

b) Develop the field service component as a new 200-level with more potential for in-depth analysis. Frame this new course as an exploration of the scholar/activist tradition in African American studies, through a visual arts lens.

With either of these options, it is also important to resolve the logistics issues: transportation and my presence at each meeting.