Philosophy of Teaching
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“Why won’t you give me the answer?” - Student

“My answer wouldn’t be authentic to who you are as an artist” - Basem

This exchange happens at least once per semester, across all my lower level courses where students are still unlearning the excuses and crutches they’ve relied on prior to their experience in my studio. Critical thinking. It hurts, especially when you’re still learning to ride that bike and keep falling off with each wobble and crack in the surface. And in the arts, in the studio, in your bedroom late at night with just you and your artwork, the artist is navigating an infinite number of possibilities. And sometimes they fall off that bike.

The biggest challenge I’ve found to learning is embracing the risk of being wrong. No one wants to be wrong, particularly when faced with peer lead critique that sometimes cuts to the core of who that individual is as a person. Students can take it personally and view it as a reflection of themselves. Once this hurdle is conquered, that the fear of being ‘wrong’ is simply part of the creative process, students can surpass the acceptable to the exceptional. To learn many students need to first unlearn and create space for genuine growth to occur. Once that space is created we can begin an exploration based on introspection, experimentation, and refinement.

Welcome to my lower level courses, where I will introduce both the tools of creativity in a systematic building of skills, and the processes of creativity through a myriad of techniques applied across the classroom and customized for each student’s learning style. To me, students are not vessels to be filled because a vessel will never fill itself. It will always be dependent on another to apprentice the student. Rather I view the process of teaching as creating a sponge full of “creativity spaces” that soaks up anything it comes in contact with. The sponge absorbs because it doesn’t know how not to absorb. This is the creation of a lifelong learner. My initial goals here are to hold mirrors to the student so they can learn who they are, as artists, and understand what their visual voice sounds like.

At this stage I utilize a combination of lecture followed by seminar style inquiry where I pose challenging questions and invite debate. Technical tools are brought into the mix in stages, introducing exactly the required amount to finish a specific project. Each project references real world artworks reinforcing that we are artists using technology as process in our medium. Each project is designed to be an expression of the individual’s loves, hobbies, emotions, and personality. Every student does the same project with totally unique results. As part of this process we pursue introspective exercises that root out creative launch points such as journaling, poetry, music, and student lead discussions where they speak about their unique life experiences and cultural heritages. This allows me to learn about each student as an individual so I can customize my approach to their own learning style with references that they can personally identify with. I meet them where they are, to make them feel like valued individuals. This also allows the students to begin developing a sense of camaraderie with each other in preparation for the higher-level courses. One goal is that we operate as a team, always, because that is real life. This requires that I also take the role of learner because art and culture are in perpetual motion, and they are now both consumers and creators of niches that might be new to me. They watch me practice the creative process with them because I am the lifelong learner I wish them to become. And when they watch me learn, like they are, they build trust in me, and deliver passionate work.

Projects in all my courses are returned to students, repeatedly, shamelessly, until they are polished to be something worthy of their portfolio. We embrace the concept of experimentation, which is why my studio is nicknamed “The Lab”, a place where we dare to fail in our ideas, until we succeed. But the lab has no space for excuses and they learn this quickly. Once I establish a baseline through in class workshops to learn each student’s learning style, I push them beyond comfort zones in a customized one on one manner. Sometimes this push is uncomfortable, and they learn this is normal.

All projects are based on research and the abilities to communicate in writing and public speaking are developed through papers, journals, discussions, presentations, and critiques. In the higher-level courses the research switches from introspective to library based. Here the goals become more tangible and the courses are broken down into concrete milestones as they begin to master the creative process. Creative briefs are handed out, research findings are summarized in reports, strategies are developed, and concepts are submitted for team (class) feedback. By successfully navigating the expectations of the lower level prerequisite courses, students in the higher stages will be producing work that is inspired from their own unique life stories, like the true artists that they are, but built around clear narratives with mastered processes. Throughout the higher-level course I operate as a sounding board. I still don’t give them direct answers to content narratives but respond with questions to point their thinking in directions that have smart solutions based on what I’ve learned about them as individuals. The goal is to push critical thinking, distinct narratives, and polished creative processes.

Throughout all my courses I integrate many real world experiences such as NYC museum visits, Chelsea gallery walks, design studio tours, visiting artist lectures, community projects, and opportunities for projects based on collaborations with area businesses or other departments. Every one of these is tied into learning objectives through seminar style discussion on the roles of art in contemporary visual society, consumer culture, DIY ethics, and individual responsibilities as consumers and creators of these cultures.

My own growth as an educator artist is tied directly to student growth. It embraces that to be contemporary in visual culture I must both be continually immersed in the creation of this culture and an avid consumer of culture. Expecting students to learn through experimentation requires I too will continue to learn, and relearn. I welcome them to watch my creative processes, successes and failures, and invite their feedback for both the effectiveness of my pedagogy to the clarity of communication embedded in my personal artworks. By mentoring them to grow, I grow. And when I grow, I can mentor more effectively. We are reciprocal.

With a background in corporate culture I also thrive on measurable metrics to assess the success of my teaching philosophy. Over the past 4 years as the sole person responsible for the development of the graphic design/print department, I’m confident that my teaching philosophy is effective. This is evidenced from classroom observations, student opinion reports, and report backs I receive from admissions departments in area schools such as Rutgers Mason Gross, Pratt, and School of Visual Arts. I now have a working relationship with SVA admissions where they come to my studio for portfolio reviews and admit students on the spot. Many of my alumni keep in touch with me. I’ve watched them succeed in the fine arts gallery scene around the NYC-Philadelphia regions or secure full time positions with competitive NYC companies like MTV, Viacom, and Shutterstock.

Ultimately my overarching goals revolve around portfolios that show a mastery of the technical craft expressed in the diversity and uniqueness that is honest for each individual, myself included. Their work should sound authentic to their voice as artists, as mine should sound authentic to my identity. This is why I don’t give answers, but I’ll guide everyone to find the ones that are true for who they are.