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Teaching Philosophy

I empower young people to discover the artist and scholar latent within them. I do not subscribe to the idea of talent as a thing a person simply possesses or does not. I believe that each human has nearly limitless potential in almost any arena and that given the proper motivation, supports, training and perseverance anyone can become master of almost anything. I imagine myself as standing on a higher rung of a ladder I share with my students, reaching down to help them climb higher. I'm invested in their success and I think they can most readily achieve it when granted agency in their process.

I structure my classes to reflect a strong belief in progressive educational ideas. I endeavor to make the learning student lead wherever possible. In my animation course I have certain learning outcomes, for example becoming proficient at keyframing movement in Adobe After Effects, that dictate the use of specific programs or tools. But the project I assign, creating a title sequence for a show of the students' invention, grants them freedom over the content and look of the outcome. I design projects with flexibility to allow students to create a truly personal expression, explore some aspect of the curriculum more fully, or study an approach that there isn't time for the whole class to cover. I also actively encourage collaboration, from a team based stop motion animation project, to round table presentation and feedback sessions for final project proposals. This sort of group work helps to foster peer communities that students maintain throughout their lives.

As a student I was most influenced by professors who were truly invested in my success, and who took the time to understand my work and mentor me. In my teaching I try to spend as little time as possible talking at students from the front of the room. I have found that the more direct the contact, the better received the message will be. I introduce projects, conduct slideshow lectures of relevant artists and demo software from the lectern. But as soon as broad concepts are shared I engage with students individually or in small groups. This serves two functions I consider critical. Firstly, it challenges a traditional power dynamic, where the professor is a droning authority, reciting facts from over there. Instead, I become a knowledgeable advocate who interfaces with students at their level, where they work. Secondly, it positions the students and me for direct dialogue. Questions are less frightening to ask when the asking isn't a performance before the whole class, and the answers can be specific to that student's needs.

I encourage students to participate in a variety of ways, not least of which is contributing to the daily dialogue of the class. My syllabi read, "It is my expectation that each and every student engage every time we meet. This means asking a question, stating an opinion or otherwise contributing to the exchange of ideas." On the first day of class I explain that the classroom learning environment functions most effectively when a vigorous exchange of ideas takes place. My knowledge and opinions, while valuable, are simply not enough to provide what I believe an effective college course should offer. Students enrich the class for each other when they are empowered to offer their opinions and encouraged to ask questions, not just in critiques, but every day. The dialogue that occurs in my classes ranges from topics like formal considerations, connections between student work and that of established artists, to social issues and politics. One of the goals of my classes is to help students learn use the technical skills they're bulding to comment

on the world and their position in it.   The critical thinking skills honed in a vigorous conversation about a class project is part of what gives them that voice as artists.

The bedrock of effective practice is the willingness to fail, and then to try again. Productive failure is often where we learn the most and I frequently tell my photography students that the only thing separating me from them is that I've failed 10,000 times more than they have. I stress that in order to hone a craft you have to put your time in; there are no shortcuts if you want something to be incredible. With that said, I think students typically have more to gain from experimenting broadly and gaining some degree of proficiency in many things than mastering any one idea or modality. I urge my students in Advanced Digital Imaging to consider every project prior to the final one to be a proof of concept rendering rather than a piece of finished art. This encourages experimentation and acceptance of the need for small failures on the way to larger success.

I employ a "two-channel" approach to giving feedback about creative projects. I hold group critiques and take participation in them very seriously. Again, the multiplicity of viewpoints is essential in that environment. I make a point in critiques, especially in introductory sections with students new to studying art, to focus on the parts of a piece that are successful, even if it works in ways they didn't intend. In order to make certain that vital information isn't left out of the feedback loop, I also provide a feedback sheet when returning work. That sheet includes rubric based scores on essential characteristics of the project, as well as comments that didn't fit into or occur to me during the critique.

Feedback is also a vital mechanism by which I improve my teaching practice. I am currently a part-time lecturer and, as such, student evaluations are not required at either of the institutions where I teach. However, I ask my students to complete them, as forthrightly as possible, each and every semester. The feedback I receive, especially through the comments section, the importance of which I stress to them, plays an important role in how I structure subsequent classes. I'm very open with my students about this and I firmly believe that the agency I grant them during the semester leads them to feel invested in my course and to provide meaningful input.

My approach to teaching supports students and leads to valuable learning outcomes—I see it in the work they produce every semester.   By creating individual, first-hand experiences my students are engaged, not only as art scholars but as members of a powerful learning community. By granting them agency throughout the course, and by impressing upon them that our success as a community relies on their participation they become strongly invested in my course material and are engaged as critical thinkers.