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STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Our students do not come to us as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge that exists prior to them and without their participation. Rather, our students come to us as whole persons, with personal histories of triumphs and pains, knowledge earned, and lively capacities—intellect-ually, emotionally, and spiritually. It is upon this basic understanding that my teaching philosophy is composed. Learning, therefore, is not a practice of opening students’ heads and depositing “knowledge” only to withdraw it with some instrument—what Paulo Freire called “the Banking Method”¹ and William Badgley called essentialist ideology “where teachers represent the guardians of knowledge.”² Rather my philosophy calls for engagement with each student meeting her where she is, not where I want her to be. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks describes a similar notion:

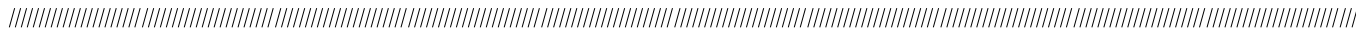
“[for] those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not to merely share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”³

Teach Students, Not Content

It may sound odd at first to say I don’t teach content, yet instead, I teach students. The difference is profound. It means that my primary job in the studio or classroom is *to learn my students*. I’m required to learn their intelligences, histories, anxieties, and where they experience success. The reasoning here is three-fold. First, this promotes that I meet students where they are and embrace them there. Second, I (or the class collaboratively) can draw upon their previous knowledge to build new knowledge that endures. Lastly, I don’t use content to teach students, I ‘use’ students to teach content. It is through collaborative engagement that students “cover,” with me as their co-learner, that content for which we are all responsible.

Shaping the learning Environment

So I find myself working to design and foster an environment wherein students might find themselves...learning. Learning can never be forced upon a learner from the outside; we are all autodidacts, wherein anything we learn, we teach ourselves. So then what is the role of the teacher? I think it is to design, from room architecture, to project architecture (offering a meaningful challenge through scope and timing), all the way through to assessment architecture. Each contribute to the learning environment in measure. However, the most critical aspect is growing an environment of trust between students and teachers as well as among students. A trust that makes room for failure, the greatest asset of the educational moment. To preserve the opportunity to fail in the “safe” environment of the academy allows exploration and risk-making which fuels student growth.



I set parameters, Students set agenda

It is my role as an educator to construct the framework of a course by determining when we will meet, for how long, and with what regularity. Furthermore I determine the structure of our conduct, such as the use of Protocols (journaling) or in a seminar we might stand to speak. Additionally, as the educator, I determine the required course material sources. Beyond these armatures, students must determine what it is we work on each day (in relationship to the project schedule). Remember that students teach content; and the content we engage comes from their critical reflection upon course meetings, course materials, the work of their colleagues, and often additional research with which they are involved. All of these rich contributions shape the studio/class work. Instead of content being extolled to them by an authority, it is being built by them in an active way.

Overcoming Passivity

Perhaps the largest threat to learning, becoming, and citizenship is passivity. Much of our consumer culture thrives on promoting passivity by its very forms, let alone its content. I find that the training for such passivity takes place in school—primary, secondary, and even undergrad.

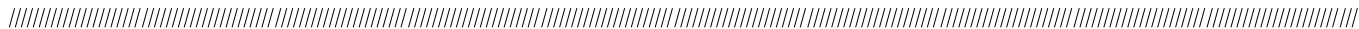
I am interested in class activities intended to overcome passivity; such that each student is invited to voice, not by parroting the knowledge of others but engaging in a process that becomes their own. In contrast to essentialism, I most align with the educational ideology of progressivism; the student-centered, experiential approach to teaching. Progressive educators view students as contributing members of society (or in this case, contributing members of a classroom). From this vantage point, students have something to contribute to the curriculum allowing teachers to take on the role of facilitators.

“every experience is a moving force”—John Dewey

It was John Dewey's book, *Experience and Education*, which increased awareness about the progressive educational movement (1938). In it, he wrote, “every experience is a moving force.”⁴ Therefore, my role as a facilitator is to capture the momentum of this force and direct it down a path where students can make connections between their experiences and content born of the interplay between students and their teacher.

Precisely, I value students as thinking beings that bring experience and preference to the classroom. I am receptive to the idea that students can teach me and expound my understanding, even though they are typically younger. I think students will value more that which they are a part of defining, shaping, and creating. I resonate with Clifford Geertz when he argued that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”⁵

The idea here is that when I ask a question of my students, I don't ask it so that the answer *I am looking for* will show up; rather I am asking so as to listen to my students' reply; because “students bring to classrooms a store of informal knowledge, which is the personal context



[they] use to get started making sense of new ideas.”⁶ The problems with answers that pre-exist our contextualized thinking is that they get memorized for a test, get crammed, and then get ejected. I am interested in students building knowledge that they have for a lifetime.

I Value Contribution over Competition

When it comes to the dynamics of my courses, I am working to develop a learning community wherein each participant is committed to the development of every other participant in the community. I reject the prevailing notion that art education is built on competition. Rather, my teaching philosophy and career is based on the idea that collaboration makes us stronger. I endeavor to model this for my students by working collaboratively across disciplines to create a strong network of understanding that informs and energizes my practice.

It is not just that the professor cares if each student learns, but that each student cares that each student learns. What that means is that students do not do their work in isolation and competition with each other; but rather that they freely share their ideas in an environment where they will be respected. My role as an educator is to create the supportive learning environment wherein we are not looking for answers, but looking for better questions. This practice of critical inquiry will sustain intellectual activity that sharpens all the members of the community. My classroom then becomes an investment in the development of each other.

¹ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York. Herder and Herder, 1970.

² Wesley J Null. *A Discipline Progressive Educator, The Life and Career of William Chandler Bagley*. New York: Lang. 2003.

³ bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress : Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York. Routledge, 1994.

⁴ John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. West Lafayette, IN. Kappa Delta Phi. 1938.

⁵ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, New York, New York. 1973.

⁶ A. D. Williams. “Curriculum: Philosophy, History, and Politics: What Should Students Learn?” in *Teaching to Change the World* edited by Martin Lipton & Jeannie Oakes, 104-150. McGraw-Hill Companies. 2003.