

AETE-627: College Teaching in Art and Design
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Teaching Philosophy Statement

I feel that all art is a form of self-portraiture in which the artist expresses their identity. As such, it is important to me as an instructor to encourage my students to express themselves in an environment that is safe and open. I encourage students to access their experiences and their own cultural traditions as a means of fostering this expression of identity. Trust between student and instructor is essential to the learning process and I approach this by allowing myself to be as open and vulnerable to my students as they may be to me.

My main areas of knowledge revolve around painting and sculpture. I am versed in making paint both in indigenous ways and in Euro-western traditions. This includes sourcing pigments from nature, using binders such as fish roe and deer fat to make Indigenous paint, and creating mediums based on Western European recipes dating to the 16th century. I'm knowledgeable in the ways in which objects of cultural meaning can be leveraged in sculpture both from an Indigenous standpoint and from a Euro-Western standpoint. I have researched and taught both direct and indirect painting methods, beading (using Indigenous techniques), textile manipulation, wood working, non-ferrous metal smithing, print making using low tech approaches, and casting using various media. Additional expertise and research include making pigment from natural sources. My specific field of research is situated in the creation of historical mediums which were used in Renaissance Europe. I'm very interested in historical painting practices during the European Neolithic and in Indigenous painting practices.

I was born and raised in Northwestern Montana. My father was a member of the Confederated Salish Kootenai and Pend Oreille tribes of the Flathead Reservation. Because of this early life experience, I am comfortable considering a broad spectrum of objects with which to make art. I often think outside the box to create work by using materials that may not be normally considered for art making. This includes craft items as well as textiles. Using what is available both in the environment and financially is a useful set of skills that I can bring to bear in the studio to help students consider their options more fully.

I'm a passionate believer in community driven learning. To this end, I do the assignments along with my students as a means to both demonstrate various methods and techniques but also as a means to show them approaches which they may not have considered. In return, I am interested in the way my students approach learning as it often helps me think outside my own practice. In learning about my students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I find that a wider range of possibilities for creating work becomes open not only to me but to the cohort of students in the classroom.

In my current position, I teach a wide variety of ages and abilities. I'm interested in the ways in which adult learners learn and how I can better address that in the studio and classroom.

EXAMPLE

Central to my teaching philosophy is the belief that creative expression is an irreducibly social act. Because the individual exists in a nexus of historical and material forces, there is no form of individual self-expression that is not also cultural. At the same time, I recognize that my students come to the classroom with a wide range of life experiences, temperaments, and priorities. I therefore try to find ways for students to connect their lives outside the class with our activities within it. Finally, I believe students learn best when more than a grade is at stake, when the products of their labor have a life beyond the classroom through exhibitions and community-based projects.

Students are often drawn to study art for reasons of personal enjoyment and a desire for self-expression. These are admirable reasons for pursuing an interest, but they do not necessarily prepare students to engage with art as a discipline and discourse with its own histories. I help them see that while art often expresses deeply felt personal feelings, it is also influenced by social conditions and enters a public arena in which it does material and representational work. I encourage my students to realize that art matters and to take responsibility for its meaning and impact. Accordingly, I structure my classes as studio-seminars so that students' creative production occurs in the context of viewing, reading, and discussing contemporary culture. The studio-seminar model helps students develop research skills that directly support their creative work. Rather than lecture to the class about contemporary art, I often require each student to prepare a presentation on a particular artist and project. I assign manageable chunks of difficult

texts to break-out groups; the resultant notes form a collectively authored study guide. I ask students to review cultural events they have attended and present them to the class. Evaluation of student creative work occurs iteratively all stages of development. In the course of a given unit, students will share ideas for feed-back, present work-in-progress, and evaluate completed pieces in the traditional studio art critique. While students may find the analytic emphasis of this approach unfamiliar, the vast majority report that their work improves remarkably as a result. Ultimately, I seek to enable my students to understand and position their work in an evolving legacy of experimental practices in the arts.

For students to take their work seriously demands that I do, as well, and my expectations are known to be high. But for art making to remain vital, it cannot feel like another country, one where students' own interests are not allowed. I make an effort to get to know something of my students' lives outside of class and design assignments so that topics that are most deeply felt can be explored. I often prepare extensive resource lists to help students find contemporary artists working on subjects and forms that resonate with their concerns. Students are encouraged to work from what they know. In a course that asks students to relentlessly contextualize, the incorporation of student priorities can foster the kind of critical self-awareness that is the classic goal of a liberal education.

The development of critical self-awareness is enhanced by the traditional studio arts critique, in which students exhibit finished work to their peers and professors for discussion. While much of higher education remains a very private pursuit, with papers read and evaluated only by the instructor, the critique emphasizes that meaning-making is a social enterprise. Critiques help students see their work through the eyes of an audience, exposing technical flaws and conceptual weaknesses they may not have seen before. I often design my courses to amplify these functions through exhibitions, screenings, and off-campus projects. In recent years, my classes have produced a community cookbook with a local food justice nonprofit; participated in an exhibition organized by student curators in Michigan; and conceived and juried a national exhibition of screen-based new media art. These projects help students see that their education is more than training for some future career; rather, it is a meaningful activity in its own right, with immediate impact and value. This recognition raises the stakes on their work, motivating them to improve their production values and enhance their professional skills.

My teaching philosophy would run aground, however, without specific instruction in matters of craft, and the majority of my courses involve some level of instruction in digital production, primarily video and audio. Yet teaching technology presents a host of challenges. Today's platforms offer production possibilities that could quickly overwhelm available instruction time, crowding out all efforts to integrate content or discuss contemporary trends in the arts. Moreover, students arrive with wildly divergent levels of familiarity with—and confidence to tackle—production tools. Finally, the cycle of technological obsolescence is so rapid that students run the risk of graduating with already outdated skills geared to software they could never hope to purchase on their own. I therefore take a threefold approach to teaching technology: encourage a healthy skepticism of software; emphasize the core knowledge that

underpins multiple platforms; and teach students enough that they can continue to self-train. I remind students that the tools we use also use us, that they are programmed with assumptions about the work that will be produced with them—usually genres of mainstream entertainment. Students quickly learn that some kinds of artistic expression require the creative misapplication of the tools at hand. I teach workshops that emphasize transferable foundational skills and refer students to Internet resources for self-paced, specialized learning. I often establish mixed-skilled groups to work on collaborative projects and monitor them to make sure more experienced students mentor the newcomers. I schedule open days where students can propose topics for group technology workshops or sign up for one-on-one production assistance. While the precise mix of instruction in craft and theory is always in flux, this flexible suite of techniques has helped me ensure that students become fluent, well-rounded practitioners able to realize their own ideas in varied media.