

Teaching Philosophy

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I begin my ART 2503 (Glass Basics) by bringing the class into the hot shop. I proceed to gather up and drip molten glass onto the floor, the marving table, and end with the glass crackling and popping into a bucket of water. Next, I roll hot glass over a scrap of paper or wood, filling the room with the smell of smoke and ash. Then, using a stick or some other found object as a tool, I push and prod at the hot blob until it ceases to move, cracks, and falls to the floor in a theatrical crash. During this first demonstration I do not explain anything. There is no need for words because the students are having an *experience* with glass. In this moment, I do not want my words to influence their first sensory experience in the hot shop.

For me, the most natural way of being with students is through active engagement in the studio, where my personal style of teaching brings energy and a contagious enthusiasm for learning. As an instructor of glass and studio art, my aim is to motivate students to discover their own authentic, effective, and ethical studio practice. I continually refine pedagogical strategies that reveal how material knowledge, creative discourse, and solidarity in the hot shop are inextricably woven together in a cooperative studio practice (with glass). My teaching philosophy is anchored by three interdependent principles of learning and experience: (1) Meaning through Making, (2) Understanding through Critique, and (3) Lifelong Learning. These three principles stand as a reminder to me of my core values as a teacher and artist.

Meaning Through Making

Students of glass become part of a two-thousand-year-old tradition of craft, where techniques have been passed down for generations from maestro to apprentice—a strict style of experiential learning nearly impossible to master any other way. To this end, I introduce new techniques through in-class demonstrations. This is time when talking is reduced to a minimum, enabling students’ eyes to do the thinking for them. Very often, I will require assistance, so whenever possible I include my students in the process. Engaging students in my teaching breaks down the traditional role of the passive student, and cultivates both trust and a sense of ownership in their learning. At the end of my demonstration students can expect me to switch roles with them, acting as their assistant in the process (a form of flipped teaching). Through student feedback and observation, I have found that my presence in the studio during their first attempt at a technique greatly reduces the time to master it and creates space for meaning through making.

“Learning by doing raises the question of one’s talent to act, and so there is the possibility of learning very little because of the fear of being *good* at doing the work.”¹ In my class, students are exposed to messy, hands on creative practice; they dare to engage in it, to make sense of their mistakes, and to reckon the limits of their skills. Mastering a technique in the glass studio is both a physical and mental challenge, and can sometimes make students feel overwhelmed. But, when I walk into the classroom, I want students to know that they can succeed! In his own philosophy of teaching, Tim Jensen (professor of writing and rhetoric) states that “repetitious acts form patterns that

¹ Richard Sennett, “The Craftsman” (Yale University Press: 2008), 96.

become easier to perform, becoming natural and almost instinctual.” I suggest to my students that these patterns eventually become intellectual. “As skills are mastered a curiosity in the material at hand develops that is essential in creating efforts to do good quality work.”² Integrating repetition and technique as a pedagogical strategy leads to students understanding the craft and begins the process of finding meaning in their making.

Understanding through Critique

Once skills are mastered, I assign art projects that connect the craft to the world around them and success will be determined through the process of critique. My students develop works of art that are prompted by projects I assign. These may range from cooperative groups to independent studio research and can empower them with the responsibility of their own directed learning. I draw inspiration for class projects from my first-hand experiences with glass, and whenever possible I look for opportunities to include elements of my research in the assignments. In this way, I can allow my evolving curiosity about the material partially direct class content, and through shared learning, create an inclusive atmosphere and a sense of solidarity with my students. As a result, projects are almost never the same. I value the opinion of my faculty colleagues and co-workers and encourage their analysis of my students’ works outside of class. The outcome of each project I assign leads to ongoing investigations of new and more effective methods of challenging students’ understanding of the material while still keeping it accessible (and fun) for all students.

Unfortunately, our experience of *making work* has little outcome in the success of *a work* because we can often become wrapped up in logistics and process, and forget to create critical distance to establish the content. Critical distance is the space needed to recognize our bias, a key element in our understanding of art. Without critical distance we fail to acknowledge the contexts of our different perspectives. During the course of a project students will often hear me ask questions like, “Is your work giving viewers room to roam in their imagination? Are you breaking from the expected? Are you willing to give viewers a chance to discover something for themselves?” Encouraging students to pause requires them to confront their work in accordance with scale as it relates to its surroundings. Understanding critical distance is important as students finish their projects in preparation for the critique.

To further the principles of my teaching philosophy, I use variations of the class critique as a tool for both individual and group assessment. Class critiques give me insightful feedback on my teaching effectiveness, and, if necessary, the flexibility to adjust and approach the remainder of the term differently. It may seem paradoxical, but I’ve found that when I give students the responsibility of structuring their own critiques they are often the most memorable and productive empowering to take control of their own learning. Throughout the term, class critiques give me opportunities to be a mentor for my students as they develop their ability to formulate thoughtful and constructive opinions on visual forms of expression. I emphasize the importance of creating a safe and respectful space for critical discourse, which

² Tim Jensen, “Philosophy of Teaching,” online resource, University Center for the Advancement of Teaching (UCAT), The Ohio State University, <https://ucat.osu.edu/professional-development/teaching-portfolio/philosophy/philosophy-of-teaching-tim-jensen/>

empowers students to more effectively make decisions in their practice. They engage in a process that is central to critical thinking and to a liberal arts education.

Lifelong Learning

Why Lifelong Learning? I realize that most of my students will not become professional glass artists. My approach to teaching glass is holistic, and focuses on giving students a good experience of working with this challenging form of art. I have found that their shared experience of struggle in the studio emboldens students to volunteer assisting one another in a mutual effort to achieve their goals. Individuals who navigate in this space are excited and engaged in a unique process of sharing knowledge. As an instructor of glass, it is my responsibility to nurture this environment for the sake of critical listening and creative intellectual exchange, which are skills that give value far beyond the college degree.

Last year I received a Fulbright Arts Grant to Finland. At its essence, my Fulbright project pursued nontraditional forms of research with the Finnish glass community to establish effective forms of cooperative studio practice. Underscoring the importance of solidarity in studio glass and the evolving role internationalization plays in its posterity, I developed a collaborative exhibition with twenty-six glass artists showcasing cultural heritage and contemporary innovation in artistic research. The exhibition was a form of public outreach and service giving visitors from across Finland an active and memorable experience in glass. Globalization in all aspects of life is real for everyone. Navigating cultural differences and valuing the experience of others creates opportunities for greater understanding and far-reaching collaboration.

In my classes and in the hot shop, students learn critical analysis, effective communication, teamwork, decision making, creative thinking, project design, respect for colleagues, learning from mistakes, service, collaboration and commitment to community (to name a few). These are skills and values acquired through the glass experience and transferable to all disciplines, contexts and professions. They represent the learning outcomes of a liberal arts curriculum and suggest a positive trajectory for lifelong learning.