

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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I began teaching in the summer of 2000 at the request of a friend. It was a typography class at a school in Boston and, having never taught before, I was attracted to the new challenge. For over ten years prior, I made a career of agreeing to design jobs that were increasingly difficult. I reasoned that teaching art and design was no different. But I was wrong.

The amount of preparation and deconstruction of the material challenged me at first – but, in time, I handled it well. The part I was wholly unprepared for was the level of joy and infectious energy I felt from helping to create a collaborative and creative space where learning, progress, and hard work took place. Along the way, I have learned many things as an art and design educator. How my students learn best, how I can effectively teach them, and that I will always have goals to pursue as a teacher and designer. Sixteen years later, this is why I still teach art and design and why I hope to for the rest of my career.

I have found that humor and sincerity are key to communicating with my students. These are the means by which I deliver my content. Being unafraid to reveal a bit of my own personality to my students helps them relax and be open to the material of the day. Relatable comparisons and metaphor that relate to what we are learning often lead to engaging conversations. Carefully selected anecdotes from my life and career help set the stage for the topic at hand. I continue to be a practicing artist and designer, and often discuss real-life examples and situations as is appropriate. I find that students appreciate the bridge this creates between the subject they are learning and the larger world of design. I also encourage students to bring as much of themselves to the discussion as they are comfortable with. I am of the belief that the world needs more thoughtful graphic designers, and my classroom is a good place to start.

Practically speaking, I find that students enjoy a balance between lecture and discussion, demonstration and hands-on learning, and individual or small-group attention. The ratio of each is ever changing and is wholly dependent on the dynamic of each class. I pay close attention to how they respond and adjust accordingly. I have also learned that students do well by understanding early on the objectives of the course and how they relate to their program of study. I begin each class with the objectives for the day and end each class with a preview of the next one so they are clear how the course flows from week to week.

Additionally, I have learned that students form a greater understanding of the material and develop more advanced skills if I share content beyond the textbook. I feel this relates directly to the idea of bringing much of yourself to the classroom. I strive not to simply facilitate the material, but to share it with my students in a living, breathing way.

To achieve this, I endeavor to have a comfort and understanding of the course material in a real-world setting. This means that I do not teach subjects I am unfamiliar with professionally. To do so requires that I rely too heavily on the text and am at a disadvantage to the students' desire to understand the subject as wholly as possible. This also means that, as a professional artist and designer, I am tasked with perpetually taking on new challenges and learning new processes. Stagnation serves neither my students well nor me.

I also choose to not teach courses in a silo. Even before I wrote curriculum for certain areas of study or became an academic chair, I made a point of knowing where my courses fit into the larger program, which courses came before mine, and where my students would be going after. I also like to understand how my course's objectives fit into the larger program objectives. I feel that continuity of learning and looking for opportunities to pass the baton from teacher to teacher is beneficial to students.

I construct assignments and projects that speak to the world we live in, have humor, and are relatable. What's more, I make certain that they clearly speak to the course objectives and that their outcomes are demonstrably measurable. I find that varying project length and having a balance between in-class assignments and homework projects works well. I strive to create class collateral that is well organized, communicates clearly, provides appropriate detail, and is fun.

Overall, I work to create an environment where students are comfortable to consume, create, and share, are motivated to be industrious, and can discover under what circumstances they are creative and solve problems best.

I feel lucky that teaching students also means learning from students. It is inevitable that I learn something new each course I teach. Working with students in an environment that is at once challenging and creative never fails to evolve the way I see or do things a bit. This cooperative relationship has made me a better artist and graphic designer, educator, and most likely a better person.

Today, my goal as an art and design educator is a refined focus on those subjects and concepts I am most passionate about and where I have the most to offer students. These include narrative illustration and image creation, user experience and human-centered design, conceptualization and ideation, platform agnostic and modular design solutions, and nimbleness in visual problem solving. I am also very interested in the designer's role as storyteller and how creativity speaks to the human condition. I look forward to sharing this journey with my students for many years to come.