

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

What motivates me as an arts educator has evolved over the years. To compare the cost of a university degree in the Arts to the potential for professional opportunities for graduates makes for a career choice I cannot recommend casually. This realization led me to wonder what does an arts based education really offer students?

To find some demonstrable value beyond my own passionate dedication to the arts and Sculpture in particular, I looked for books and articles that focused on connections between the process of making and cognitive development, most notably *The Hand* by Frank R Wilson, and *Notes for a Theory of Making in a Time of Necessity* by Giuseppe Zambonini. Their research, and that of many others reveals that when humans began making things, tools, weapons, art with their hands, our brains grew exponentially. As our skills advanced, we began to trade, forming alliances with neighboring tribes, admiring the quality and craft of a cooking basket, a spear or a ceremonial object, not just as a useful thing but as a reflection of a mutually beneficial relationship. In this sense a historic understanding and contemporary appreciation for craft and art are at the root of a civil society.

Studio based learning environments offer multiple pathways toward developing both critical thinking and creative problem solving skills. On any given day my students may be asked to manipulate materials with their hands, operate machinery, build models, fabricate and incorporate knowledge from disciplines ranging from science, history to mathematics. Particularly today with the integration of digital fabrication tools, art classrooms provide students with a breadth of knowledge from material science to computer aided design. My teaching is deeply rooted in hands-on analog processes but I firmly believe our students must understand both fabrication languages, the digital and traditional, in order to be competitive and to authentically communicate what it means to make work in the ever-expanding field of Art today. The combination of both cognitive and embodied learning, particularly as our classrooms become more technological, offers opportunities for unique holistic experiences where students are able to integrate information across disciplines and technologies to make ideas (into) matter.

In ecological research, one universal rule of thumb is this: Diversity equates to a healthy, resilient community. This idea is at the core of my creative practice and I also apply it to my teaching. In my courses, I present artwork and ideas from a variety of cultural and political view points so my students will begin to see themselves as global citizens.

Many of my syllabi directly address issues of social and environmental justice for example in my woodworking course we discuss the political and environmental impact of the globalized forest industry as we seek to develop more sustainable studio practices. A service learning course I taught at the University of San Francisco, Artist as Citizen, was at it's core a vehicle for the students to develop relationships with and serve local nonprofits that work to support under-represented communities. More recently, this fall, after constructing life-like animal heads out of recycled cardboard and paper-mache, my Introduction the 3D students performed a pop-up procession of species (inspired by Bellingham's own) in the Western Library. In their colorful animal heads, each as unique as it's maker, the class moved collectively, embodying the vital nature of diversity in a healthy ecosystem (which we discuss as a parallel to cultural diversity), while also providing our attentive library-bound audience an opportunity to de-stress for a few moments during finals week.

As a first generation American, the daughter of political refugees and the product of a mixed race family, growing up, I often felt like an outsider. This may be why I was drawn to the arts where difference is encouraged. My awkwardness also gifted me with great insight into the challenges faced by my current students as they struggle with their own identities. Given that English was not my first language I empathize with non-native speakers and multi-cultural students. I strive to make my classrooms inclusive and safe for all speakers, cultures and identities. One way we do this is by studying work created by a broad range of artists representing a spectrum of cultures and identities. Another way is to work collectively and learn to listen to one another in class, during critique, to value each others' viewpoints and perspectives.

Teaching a diverse student body requires being able to identify less obvious concerns like mental health issues and abuse. I feel obligated as an educator to provide structure and support when I can and refer students to the appropriate campus resources when necessary. As a young adult I suffered from and received treatment for severe anxiety. What had the greatest impact on my recovery however besides the totally necessary but temporary use of doctor prescribed pharmaceuticals was SCHOOL. There I found the structure and support, mentors and friends who helped me manage and eventually overcome my symptoms. My arts education was empowering and transformative and this is in large part what I strive to offer my students today, an inclusive yet challenging environment in which to gain concrete and applicable skills, hone their creative research and explore their individual and collective identities.