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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

After more than 15 years of working as a professional theatre director and producer, I discovered my love of teaching in 2011 when invited to participate in the Kennedy Center's American College Theatre Festival. In the company of young artists, my own passion for the theatre was reinvigorated, and my ideas about its importance to society clarified and refined. Beyond simple entertainment, I began to see theatre as a means to build community, to open minds, and to contribute to positive societal change. I carry these ideas with me into the classroom and studio, as well as in my own continuing creative work.

My general approach to teaching is partly inspired by an assertion from theatre director and teacher Anne Bogart, who writes in her book A Director Prepares that "...you cannot create results. You can only create conditions in which something might happen." While she is referring primarily to theatre directing, I have adopted this same philosophy as a core tenet of my teaching. Rather than attempting to "create results," I focus on creating conditions under which learning can happen.

Specifically, I structure theatre classes at the intersection of theory and practice. In Acting classes, for example, I begin each week by studying the work of a foundational thinker, such as Stanislavski, Strasberg, Meisner, Adler, Hagen, and Chekhov, or with an examination of a more recent approach, such as Viewpoints, Suzuki, Margolis Method, or the Hendricks Method. I then explore how those theories are put into practice through exercises and scene work.

When designing courses in general, I keep in mind four basic outcomes. By the end of students' time with me, I hope they are able to: (a) access and utilize a wide range of educational resources from a variety of perspectives, (b) take ownership of, and become personally invested in, their own education, (c) recognize their individual accountability for community success, and (d) learn to collaborate with peers of diverse backgrounds and identities. To elaborate on each of these outcomes:

- (a) Students accessing and utilizing a wide range of educational resources from a variety of perspectives. Considering many of our students were raised in an age of instantaneous access to digital information, it can be easy for them to forget that a wealth of knowledge exists beyond the confines of a Google search. Helping students to understand the learning resources that are available to them, both online and in "hard" form, is core to my lesson planning. I also stress the value of digging deeper to seek out material by people of color and individuals from other underrepresented communities. In all my studio classes on acting and directing, for example, I assign primary reading material from a diverse group of both established and "cutting-edge" artists in the field, while also providing resources for students to find their own supplemental learning material, such as the Backstage online monologue finder, or a compilation of interviews with a diverse group of theatre artists.

- (b) Students taking ownership of, and becoming personally invested in, their own education. The question I dread most from students is “will this be on the test?” I want them to value the learning that happens in my courses, rather than seeing it as a means to fulfill a graduation requirement. To this end, I work to communicate in every lesson my own enthusiasm about the specific material presented, and to stress the general value of self-enrichment. I also encourage students to pursue their own interests and curiosity, setting the tone on the first day of classes by asking them to lay out personal goals for the course, and then periodically asking them to reevaluate their progress throughout the semester. For assigned readings, rather than expecting students to only retain specific information, I ask them to come to class with an exploratory question on the reading or some material that piqued their interest and made them curious to learn more. Finally, I make sure to provide opportunities for students to share their ideas about how I can create a more enriching and inclusive experience for them, and I remain open to adjusting my curriculum and teaching practices accordingly.
- (c) Students recognizing that they are individually accountable for community success. I have noticed that when students have not completed an assignment, it can be easy for them to hide in the anonymity of a lecture or “group discussion.” But when they are aware that they are not only going to be accountable to me, but to each other as well, the motivation to complete assignments intensifies. I often create specific study groups (or partners for smaller classes), who work together and are responsible to each other during class activities. For example, I might assign August Wilson’s *Fences* to be read in tandem with an excerpt from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which asserts that tragedies function best when certain dramatic criteria are met. I then assign each study group to discuss how the play adheres to, or deviates from, one of those specific criteria, followed by a presentation by each team to the class as a whole. I also create incentives for group success, such as a policy that grants “extra credit” to individuals when all members of their study group receive a grade of “B” or higher on a given project.
- (d) Students learning to collaborate with peers of diverse backgrounds and identities. Collaboration is particularly vital when teaching theatre, due to the ensemble nature of the form. While I acknowledge an atmosphere of competition can be motivating for some students, it also can create fear in others, which can restrict learning. When students feel that they are working collaboratively with their peers, as opposed to against them, I find they are less inhibited, more open to new ideas, and more engaged in their own education. To this end, I work to establish a sense of community in each of my classes through activities that establish mutual respect and a sense of collaborative learning. In a directing class, for example, instead of asking students to critique each other’s pre-production concepts, I ask members of the class to play the role of a designer or a producer who will be obliged to ask difficult questions of the student director. This allows for constructive criticism to be voiced but in a safer and more playful manner. I am also conscious of the importance of collaboration across diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and gender identities, as well as different socioeconomic backgrounds, and I strive to make sure that voices of traditionally underrepresented groups are heard and valued through careful selection of class materials and through my choices about how study groups and partners are assigned.