

# Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Central to my teaching philosophy, as someone with experience teaching a range of courses focused on studio art, research/writing and seminar formats, is a commitment to the transformative potential of both making and researching art/design in community. While many of these activities mentioned below have been developed in contexts that are focused on students building towards self-directed research/making, they can certainly be adapted into contexts where curriculum is more prescribed. There are seven central concerns that I enthusiastically engage with my teaching practice:

- 1. To introduce “extra-disciplinary” possibilities for art to reach into new terrain concerned with urgent topics - ranging from discipline-specific, related subcultures, and historical perspectives.**

In my 2020 course Beyond Green we started the semester with a public program focused on three examples of art, design and landscape architecture that dealt with watersheds. Following that we went on site to help a visiting artist harvest phragmites reeds for her public art work and met with the Academy of Natural Sciences to plan interventions into their Pennsylvania-sourced historical dioramas to learn about bioregions. The students then collected non recyclable waste from a public artwork made using packing tape and made sculptures out of it, and went through a workshop from the group Trash Academy about waste flow in the city. The students made artworks inspired by a text about seeing/visualizing the non-human perspective and finally, in an effort to link to global perspectives the students developed graphic interpretation of the UN Sustainable Development goals and installation proposals for signage and programming along the Ben Franklin Parkway that responded to the flags of the world that dot that thoroughfare to local environmental issues facing those countries. The works were all collected here in this booklet: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dAEkFOVmAxllS\\_qKkUtlcCDYmzBOHjow/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dAEkFOVmAxllS_qKkUtlcCDYmzBOHjow/view)

- 2. To make a learning environment that engages the different kinds of learners found together in any classroom setting;**

For every learner that says a field-trip is their favorite way to learn, there are those who do not know how to ask questions of a guest speaker in order to integrate an external experience into their personal practice and interests. For some, giving a public presentation can provide the catalyst for them to lead others, while there are other learners who only respond to individualized feedback from a faculty. It is for these reasons, grounded in my years of experience inside and outside the classroom, that I begin every class with a survey focused on understanding the learning styles/personal research interests of the students. All this informs my multi-modal approach to pedagogy that incorporates diverse formats to facilitate a range of encounters that both stretch student’s capacity and meet them in a place that is familiar enough to build from.

This learning style survey is backed up by a classroom culture and assignments that strongly incorporate these diverse range of learning styles. For example: One visual tool I am particularly invested in is the map (sometimes more accurately a mind/topic map, other times a geographic tool). I have found no better way to open up the world than to take a map and draw on it, redraw it, or use it as a discussion tool.

Maps have no clear beginning and ending, engage visual skills over reading and spoken language skills, can be generated by groups, and offer a perfect opportunity to combine and depict complex ideas.

**3. To create a learning community that also points the students towards creating their own communities of practice;**

In recent years I have begun to place greater emphasis on activities that constitute a class community or when I have run a department - a cohort of students or a degree program. This clearly manifested with a recent summer course I co-taught at Ox-Bow School of Art where the subject matter of the art and readings was itself focused on collectivity and therefore the students needed to find connections to one another quickly through projects asking them to consider and visually depict group identity. Another example was a seminar on collaboration I taught at SAIC that required students to interview other artists about their approach to collaboration. I emphasize to students that any kind of art/design practice can be a platform for both finding and creating a community - taking forms such as starting an organization, organizing group exhibitions/events, or something more thoroughly playful or experimental in its format. This relates to studio courses just as it does to my background in teaching professional practice, arts administration and curatorial practice seminars, which offer opportunities to foreground the significance of business literacy, the power of framing concepts, orchestrating experiences and managing a project through skilled facilitation.

I see even the most conventional art/design education as offering a model for learning in public, through individual artists generously sharing their private introspections in public critiques and exhibitions. This offers an opportunity to discuss the value of making art and doing research in a learning community like a school where you learn from other artists/researchers to approach similar problems, and deepen your vocabulary to talk about art which benefits both an individual practice as well as increases the capacity to facilitate art experiences for others. Over years I have developed a model for following up on group critiques with 1-on-1 discussions with students to process their experience and make plans for future work. This simple gesture is surprisingly uncommon in art education and has led to an increased rigor on my part in making the sometimes “hidden curriculum” of assessment visible and meaningful to students. It has also led to an ongoing conversation with students about what they are learning from other student’s work through group experiences like critiques or oral presentations of research - highlighting the value of learning in community.

**4. To encourage a curiosity about how things work aesthetically, technically, and socially that results in a student striving to make and craft rigorously in order to mirror, undo and play with those existing forms in a literate, informed and pointed manner;**

As the old saying goes - Self-direction does not grow on trees or manifest from thin air. Through a series of short and long-term projects, the skills to ask a good question and know how to answer it are cultivated in my classes.

In some cases this manifests by breaking down projects into constituent parts so that confidence can grow and conviction around certain approaches can be developed. For instance, I have utilized the “Youtube Playlist” assignment, where each student has to curate and write program-notes for a 10 minute youtube

video screening that is thematically adjacent to their studio work or writing. This quick project combines what often constitutes casual online research with creative practice, with the added benefit of being able to “spill” over into a writing project or a video screening. This spill-over effect is crucial to how I design my assignments, where there is always discussion of what potential may exist for one effort to impact the next and for the artist to begin to stitch together something resembling a practice.

In the studio, the design of experiences leading towards self-direction has a similar potential to be sequenced and scaffolded. I present technical exercises within larger frameworks that help students understand the choices embedded in their approach - such as the use of literal or non-literal audio representations in video works, for example.

From a curricular perspective, one course I designed exceeded the limits of a semester and became a two semester required course called Technologies of Art which introduced graduate students to over a dozen technical tutorials in both “traditional” and “new” media that included how to make a box in a woodshop and how to make one using a laser cutter. This material literacy across a continuum captures the learning objective of encouraging students to consider how material research requires constant decisions about what projects will necessitate what materials and trains them to have a flexible and tactical approach to materiality.

**5. To equip artists, administrators and scholars to realize their visions within their own articulated critical/ethical framework and recognize the historical precedents to those approaches;**

While art is the center of gravity that binds most of my classroom experiences together, there are often other frameworks brought from other disciplines and spheres. Those may be concepts like “Society”, or a locale like “South Jersey” or a method like “Portrait.” With every semester in the initial class I begin the experience together by taking the title or premise of the course and breaking it into a series of blank fields on a large writing service. From this starting point we break apart our assumptions and associations with the very terms of the class that we are gathered together for. This provides a common language of the class, questioning the basic terms we are operating from. It sheds light on disagreements and differences - asking how it is that such basic concepts such as “art”, “environment”, “society”, “curating” or “documentary” found in course titles can elicit such different associations?

In courses where this has not been appropriate or possible, a course-specific reference has provided a similar shared foundation for the initial conversations. These common reference points can be a film or a more wide-ranging textbook such as “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer as a text that can be used as a prompt to frame the range of themes we will work through in a course. Another approach I’ve used has been for a reading to be something we revisit again and again through an exercise, as I have done with my “Socratic Mapping” exercise based on the theorist Pascal Geilin’s essay “Mapping Community Art” (this project was detailed as a lesson plan I wrote in the recent Allworth Press book “Art As Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art”).

These initial tools become the foundation for ongoing conversations about the frameworks that guide student research practices, which often combine existing value systems as well as discoveries made in the classroom.

**6. To see exchange itself as integral to making art, design and writing express values;**

The premise that a budget is “a moral document” is often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr and is a cornerstone of economic justice movements doing workplace organizing and advocating for redistribution of resources through public policy and taxation. But it has come to take on a particular significance in my approach to teaching and facilitating socially-engaged art as a space to express the values of a project and appreciation for the people contributing to it. I often find that money is the first thing students want to talk about with visiting speakers and something they scrutinize most fiercely when a project makes claims around a justice issue.

When I teach professional practices courses we always work on an application or a proposal that includes a budget, but also leaves room for talking about the other kinds of resources flowing through a project such as culturally-specific knowledge, collaborative energy or cultivating community accountability. While students may need an understanding of economics historically and contemporarily in order to transform it and to navigate the theoretical frameworks for doing so, they also need to become comfortable with simply talking about money, cash flow, sharing, value, cooperation and exchange in order to be able to use them as a medium through which to express those theories and their values.

This also helps them ask deeper questions about how the industries they want to join manage resources and the potential for those industries to influence their strategy and vice versa. It also impacts the way that they can think about the necessity of creating their own terms of exchange and resource sharing within their communities.

**7. To recognize the contexts in which we make art experiences and encourage a “contextual awareness” that extends from the original sources of materials to the venues for display/publication/presentation and the audiences that encounter their works;**

One of the experiences crucial to my own education has been developing projects that exceed the limits of art’s institutional or disciplinary frameworks. When working within other “alternative” or community contexts, you become aware of the pleasures of participating in those worlds and at times the necessity to suspend the artists’ persona and agenda in order to engage authentically. At times this has also helped me to appreciate the specificity and limits of disciplines, and also often to become further committed to the project of democratizing access and equity.

An awareness of this need for a broader contextual literacy in art education has impacted my teaching through both an emphasis on research, as well as experiential learning. My courses tend to include a significant number of field trips and visitors where students can get first-hand exposure to a diverse array of knowledgeable practitioners. This ability to understand the context in which artworks exist also has a deeply pragmatic dimension - the more that a student understands about something they admire, the easier it will be for them to describe it, analyze it, emulate it, or improve upon it. I feel an ethical responsibility to stretch beyond my own perspective and experience to prepare students to navigate a diverse labor market and that means avoiding one-size-fits-all professional planning and giving them tools to comprehend how artists, scholars and administrators realize their visions. Whenever I have the

opportunity through classroom visitors, we will ask for the back story of how projects came into being and what kinds of planning, decisions, compromises and negotiations went into the process of “making something happen.”

Contextualization also includes grappling with what is absent, and that can turn any research project into a critical intervention in the field. So as the student becomes aware of gaps that relate to their interests in the field or the literature, they can also assert the necessity for the broader social context to be included in the story. This is where the politics of the archive and how history is written can become grounds for discussion about diversity and inclusion in how art and writing are taught. Opening up such a space intersects with my own experiences as an activist within the field of education through projects like Never-The-Same.org that reimagine what stories are included and excluded.

This approach to seeing the broader context in which work exists can help a student think of all of their choices, from where they source materials and citations to where they hang a painting or publish a paper, as creative decisions deserving of critical attention.

## **CONCLUSION**

The only appropriate conclusion to a statement of teaching philosophy is an admission and celebration of the fact that I am still learning. The students teach me what is urgent and what is challenging. The classroom requires me to always be mindful of power dynamics and how they shape communication. It requires me to ask how I can take the same care for communication and relationships that I practice in my projects, and do it in the classroom every day. It requires me to think about how to pass on these values so they can be intentionally perpetuated and evolve as new concerns and questions emerge for future generations. This is the joy of teaching.