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Teaching Reflections

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The remarks below were delivered by Professor Quigley at the opening Sheridan Teaching Seminar lecture on September 11 2006. Along with Professors Mari Jo Buhle (American Civilization and History) and Michael Paradiso (Neuroscience), Prof. Quigley described how she developed her own teaching practice and how she continues to reflect on and improve it.

As honored and pleased as I am to be here today, I am also utterly astonished! This time last fall I was in the audience where you are now, listening to Brown and RISD professors talk about their teaching practices. Little did I realize that, as a result of attending the Sheridan Seminar, I would be standing here at the podium today. In retrospect, I can see the difference this class would have meant for me as a new instructor almost 28 years ago. Fortunately for my students and myself I have learned a great deal since then.

To understand the teaching of 'jewelry design' at RISD it will be important to have a brief introduction into the nature of our program and how the classes are structured.

The department of Jewelry & Metalsmithing is a comfortable size, with between thirty-five BFA students and twelve MFA students each year. After the freshman foundation year, undergraduate students select their major and for the next 3 years classes are focused on studying the fundamentals of the field. I should mention that the emphasis of our Department is on Jewelry design. The Metalsmithing in our name applies to a process we use in our work. Metalsmithing commonly refers to the design and making of vessels and flatware such as bowls, teapots, and

spoons. As part of our commitment to this art form, we invite a true “metalsmith” to teach a class in our department every year.

Graduate students come to RISD to study for a two-year program. Simply put the objective is to do advanced work. The graduate curriculum is structured around facilitating and supporting students’ studio work, and research. While at RISD, a graduate student’s charge is to delve deeply into themselves, to encounter and develop their personal artistic vision. While we encourage students to test their theories and to take risks, we also recognize and work from the premise that jewelry maintains an inherent relationship to the body. The final result is a thesis project that is a culmination of an in-depth study of a topic yielding a written thesis, a body of work, and a portfolio exemplifying their professional credentials.

Another important aspect to my teaching practice is the setting of the studio as the classroom and the exchange with my students as we work together. Studio work is a lynchpin to learning at RISD. For Jewelry graduate students each studio class meets for five hours. These weekly classes can include a variety of classroom activities ranging from: demonstration, discussion of design ideas, review of work in progress, group critiques, and, most importantly, individual meetings.

It is a very public setting with a class of twelve; no one can hide. Unlike handing in a paper to one’s professor to read, it is the mandate of the studio experience to make the revisions and adjustments public. That is, each student exposes their thinking and their work to a group of peers under the guidance of an instructor. My role as the teacher is to facilitate the organic nature of the studio environment while allowing for a comfortable, or sometime uncomfortable, exchange of risk.

How does a chef explain his or her inspiration for a recipe, the composer a symphony, or the writer a novel? All of these art forms can be initiated through an abstract thought, intuition, and instinct rather than a theoretical formula.

In preparation for the creative opportunity that this presentation offered me, I began simply by gathering random thoughts, ideas and proven practices. To begin the process of review I jotted notes on scraps of paper at every opportunity, even pulling over to the side of the road while driving to scribble a thought. I tried to catch every speck of an idea hoping these sketchy notes when compiled would become something worthwhile and would provide a jump-start when I began to write.

When I finally started the process of reviewing and organizing my collection of miscellaneous thoughts, truthfully, I was disappointed with the outcome. These hurried notes, scraps of thoughts, and ideas which had otherwise seemed worth pulling over for now read as mundane, obvious, and ‘practical.’ I did not find in them at all the elevated, poetic reminiscences which touched on the meaningful issues of my teaching that I thought I was recording.

I had hoped the spontaneity of my note-taking approach would document core essences of my learning to be an educator, how I found my own voice in the classroom, and express the many ways in which I enjoy my profession.

My dissatisfaction with the outcome was leading me to consider the need to locate another starting place for this presentation. Then I recalled that dissatisfaction is a familiar occurrence coming often after collecting and reviewing ideas when I design jewelry. This unrest was just another phase in my “processing,” in fact, I could now recognize I had just repeated my usual “formula” for designing while preparing to write for this Sheridan presentation.

These steps had been for me a tried and true process for my own design investigation. This pattern that I had stumbled upon was familiar. The uncertainty that had made me so tense was a necessary part of the “working out.”

Then like an old mantra, I recalled advice I had often given my students when they were not content with their initial design and were reluctant to begin new work while they waited for a better idea.

Unless the design was really hopeless (which it seldom was), I would reassure them that this first raw idea could be a significant reflection of ‘their’ unique intuitive insight, and may contain more personal content than they think.

I would try to make the point that it is better to begin to work on something, however imperfect, than wait for the arrival of another idea you might like better. Who knows when it could arrive? If one has a less than perfect idea but it is available now, accept it and begin working it! See where it goes, you don’t have to be married to it, just begin with it.

So I reconsidered, set aside my doubts for now, and began again to review the scraps of notes. Like my students, who return to their designs with a fresh perspective and with renewed vigor, I returned to my notes with an understanding that I should not recount such abstract notions such as intuition, industriousness, and indeed doubts—as they are all a part of learning and therefore a part of teaching.

Ironically, my thirty plus thoughts on teaching did not become the main focus of my ten minutes with you today as I had intended. Instead it has become a narrative about the search, the process, and reflection involved in identifying meaningful aspects of my practice.

To conclude, so I don’t keep you completely in the dark about the nature of the thoughts I had been so avidly collecting. I will share briefly seven of the “notes” that I scribbled to myself and now find worth mentioning.

1. *A good day*: A good day is one in which I can see that a student has through their focus and effort discovered something of significance in their work. This puts the student directly in touch with their potential. As this cycle repeats, student's commitment to their art is cultivated.
2. *Obvious but true*: Students who make the most progress in a class are those who can enter with an open mind (or be willing to try to open their mind as the semester progresses).
3. *Studying art is hard work of a different sort*: There is the inner complex work of the mind and the outer physical work of the hands and body. As time goes on, it will be revealed if they will work together or if one or the other will dominate.
4. *Keeping on task*: My job as a teacher is to ask questions, make suggestions, offer honest criticism, and keep students accountable to themselves to work as seriously and as rigorously as they are capable. Making expectations, objectives, and grading procedures clear early and often, supports student performance.
5. *The real work*: Some gifted students almost seem to teach themselves and work well independently. Of course they are great to work with. But it is the other less naturally capable, less engaged, students that really need the support and patience of a teacher. Teaching these students can be challenging, but when progress is made both student and teacher are gratified.
6. *Eyes on the prize*: As a teacher I must totally believe that what I am asking of the students is possible for them to achieve. I have to have confidence in a positive outcome for them, while remaining open to what form it will take (in an environment where creative thought rules one must keep the balance between expectation and surprise).
7. *Aligned faculty*: There is much value in working to establish a positive collaborative relationship among colleagues. This provides a sense of community, group commitment, energy, support, collective experience, feedback on new ideas, and ultimately, friendship grows out of years of mutual effort.