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## *Pedagogy across the Liberal ARTS: Helping students to become the agents for their own learning*

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*In response to the Scarecrow's request for brains, the Wizard of Oz replied, "I'm not much of a magician, as I said; but if you will come to me tomorrow morning, I will stuff your head with brains. I cannot tell you how to use them, however; you must find that out for yourself".*

-L. Frank Baum, The Wizard of Oz

Like most teachers, the "Wizard" of Oz was not much of a magician. There was no magic through which he could respond to the requests of the Scarecrow, the Lion, the Tin Woodsman and Dorothy. After all, how could he be expected to create brains where there were none, courage where it must be proved, or a heart where affection was lacking, much less return Dorothy to reality in the midst of her own dream. All that remained to him was to create a mechanism whereby the petitioners could perceive that they must become the agents for their own rewards. The happy ending of the story depended the outcomes provided by the petitioners themselves. As **Paula Vogel** argued so eloquently at Opening Convocation this past September "The process of art and the process of education should be comparable: in these four years you are involved in a great creative endeavor - the making of yourselves" (Brown Alumni Magazine, November/December, 1998).

All faculty at Brown are confronted with classrooms full of petitioners like the Scarecrow, some more committed to a good educational outcome than others, but all,

ostensibly, there to learn. How do faculty provide educational environments in which students develop their ability to take responsibility for their learning experience? This article explores some of the pedagogical strategies used by Brown faculty in the applied arts to facilitate creative expression in hopes that many will be of value to colleagues across the curriculum.

Faculty in traditional academic disciplines often describe their pedagogical goal for a class or course as the impartation of a specific body of knowledge. The choice of means to accomplish that goal: lecture, assigned readings, lab exercises and discussions, among others, may successfully set out information, but do not necessarily facilitate deep learning. Students may learn the information required, but fail to perceive its significance. They may “know” the information, without understanding that use of its potential depends upon their personal investment in the educational process. Faculty increasingly feel that students are “tuned -out”, need to be entertained, or merely wish simple, easily accessible, answers. The notion that learning is the end product of an arduous process that is not always “fun” appears to be under threat of extinction. How can faculty in traditional disciplines “dis-orient” students, as Paula Vogel advocated at Opening Convocation, in order to help them learn for themselves?

Brown faculty in the applied arts: **Creative Writing, Modern Culture and Media, Music, Theatre Speech and Dance, and Visual Arts**, are daily confronted with the problem faced by the Wizard of Oz. They can, of course, stuff their students heads full of techniques and methodology, but, like the Scarecrow, their students will only produce results if they find out how to use them for themselves. This is especially true in the introductory courses where most of the students are not arts concentrators. Faculty across the arts describe students who may plan to be physicists or economic analysts but seek to develop their creative abilities as part of their liberal arts education. The strategies used by faculty colleagues in sculpture, musical composition or film-making, provide valuable perspectives for all academic disciplines across the liberal arts curriculum on the crucial role of process in the learning experience. The processes of creative work: imagine, play, write, practice, perform, revise, reflect, discuss, perform, and revise again effectively translate into the process of critical thinking and scholarship as well.

**Julie Strandberg** (Dance), chair of the University Creative Arts Council, offers a striking example of how exchanges across the liberal arts curriculum has the power to transform the educational experience for both students and faculty. In conjunction with

Carolyn Adams, principal dancer for many years with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, Strandberg has been developing a three volume series “The American Dance Legacy”. Combining education and preservation, it includes videos, such as Don McKayle coaching students in his “Rainbow ‘Round my Shoulder”, a dance piece based on texts about the experiences of prison chain gangs. Textual resources, such as diaries and letters, are also available for students to study as a means to comprehending McKayle’s creative process. In addition, scholars in other disciplines are invited to respond to these materials. Prof. **Thomas Banchoff** (Mathematics) has contributed a piece entitled “Dance and Dimensionality” and Prof. **Thompson Webb** (Geological Sciences) has written “Rainbows as Metaphors”. Such fusions of intellectual analysis and creative process demonstrate the value of pedagogical exchange across the liberal arts at Brown.

How to get students to draw upon their own internal experience as the first step in developing a creative process is the most common pedagogical challenge for faculty in the arts. Because the product(s) of the process is concrete: visible, audible, readable, etc.; the challenge faced by the faculty is more overt than in other disciplines. Is it, however, different? Both the challenge and the strategies employed by arts faculty may be as crucial to learning in chemistry or history. If so, then the strategies used by faculty such as Profs. **Gerald Shapiro** (Music), **Richard Fishman** (Visual Arts), **Lowry Marshall** (Theatre), Assoc. Profs. **Marlene Malik** (Visual Arts), **Leslie Thornton** (MCM), and **Julie Strandberg** (Dance) may prove to help you transform your own approach to how you teach language or anthropology or biology, etc. Prof. **Jeff Titon** (Music) teaching of ethnomusicology offers students alternative means of achieving the educational goal of the course: comprehension of the meaning of music to those who make it. Assoc. Prof. **Elaine Bearer** (Bio-Medicine-Pathology) points out the value and costs of mentoring which is crucial to her work as both a biologist and a teacher of musical composition.

Gerald **Shapiro** teaches courses such as MU 0103 Modal Counterpoint. He observes that Brown students arrive with highly developed critical faculties, but often untapped, “incipient”, creative faculties. They are accustomed to proceeding by intellection, but, he notes, “artists must be comfortable with material which is intellectually unknowable fully and must be willing to take chances”. He uses problem-solving sequences as a means to help students learn to take those risks, to understand the process of learning through practice, and to trust their intuitive responses. For example, Shapiro will assign students to compose a piece of music in class and then perform it. He believes that getting to students learn about music through the process of creating and performing it involves learning to experience failure and the necessity for revision. First students must commit themselves to

create something: then they must write, practice, play, discuss and revise it, over and over again. Ultimately, Shapiro notes that students must learn to detach their egos from their subject in order to get the most out of the process.

**Richard Fishman** teaches Studio Foundation, Drawing and Sculpture. He points out that helping students discover their creative ability requires getting them to learn (or relearn) the value of play while appreciating the necessity for structure. To Fishman, the experience of making art is central to all learning across the curriculum. For example, in Visual Art 10, the introductory visual arts course taken by some 200 students (mostly non-concentrators) per semester, Fishman uses a variety of sensory experiences to get students to become more kinesthetically involved with their work. Music is played during class, usually brought in by the students themselves, to enhance the sense of physical immersion in the creative process. All students are expected to hang up their work for all to see and discuss. The class learns how to talk about what choices they have made and to hear how others perceive their work.

Fishman sees this process as equally applicable to sciences, such as physics or engineering, as to art. This productive fusion of intellectual and creative processes was integral to the Odyssey grant on which he recently collaborated with an undergraduate to develop a course on how spirituality is manifested in non-Western cultures and applied to art.

**Lowry Marshall** teaches Acting, the introductory studio course. She notes that the course is frequently experienced by students simultaneously with involvement in an actual University production. Marshall points out that, “Students are often rehearsing for a production at night while they’re working in an acting class during the day. Preparing for the performance of a play requires them to draw upon and integrate both creative and intellectual ways of knowing and understanding. They’re learning stage techniques and methodology in the studio at the same time that they’re applying them in the practical performance experience.” As a result, Marshall observes, “Theatre is the whole University in one course. For example, in working with John Emigh on his production of Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, students had to learn about Fermat’s last theorem, 20th century chaos theory, early 19th century English History, the cultural values inherent in landscape design, etc.” Citing the well-established connections between music and mathematics as one example, she points out that this phenomenon of disciplinary overlap is by no means limited to theatre. [See the related article on this subject by Dr. Martin Gardiner on p. 1]

Marshall's approach to teaching acting is based on the notion that students must learn to set their own goals and to evaluate for themselves how well they have achieved them. For example, in TA 23, students will go through a four-part process. First, they identify their goals for and perform a scene; second, they and their classmates critique what worked and what improvements are needed; third, they rehearse the revised scene for several weeks and then perform it again; fourth, they evaluate the degree to which they have achieved those goals and submit their self-evaluation in writing.

Like Shapiro and Fishman, Marshall has developed strategies for helping students learn to experience the characters they have been assigned in a dramatic situation. She may begin by having two students imagine an interactive scene such as the first time they met, or their dreams or fears for the future. Marshall believes that faculty across the curriculum must encourage students to develop their intuitive, inventive, creative means of expression before applying structured, critical, evaluative, conscious thought processes. This sequence will help students learn to draw out and use the comprehension and knowledge embedded deeply within their unconscious to further their learning. She has developed exercises, such as "The Art Exercise", to facilitate this process. Students learn to listen to each other for cues that will enable the whole group to explore ideas and experiences more fully. She describes this as being "present in the moment", attentive and responsive to what is happening rather than blinded and deafened by pre-conceived ideas and goals. Marshall notes that these skills are now being sought among business professionals as more conducive to effective, collaborative, work environments. The Art Exercise could be adapted to help faculty and TAs lead more effective discussion sections in the humanities and social sciences. Like Fishman, Marshall sees creative arts as central to the liberal arts curriculum as they are a catalyst for intellectual growth and change. To Marshall, teaching is not just helping students to master a concept or body of knowledge, but the opportunity to help them to develop the confidence, open mind and willingness to experiment which will sustain them in their application of knowledge throughout their lives.

**Leslie Thornton** teaches MC 71/72 Introduction/Intermediate Filmmaking. Like the others, she first seeks methods to help students divest themselves of pre-conceived ideas about the nature and purpose of film (narrative, documentary, etc.). She has developed "tricks", a series of assignments, which individually and collectively force students to open their minds to new perspectives and ideas. "The Exquisite Corpse", in which each student draws and adds a body part to a sheet of paper folded so that the previous

additions remain hidden, produces a bizarre figure emblematic of the accumulated textures and references inherently embedded in each student filmmaker. As a result, students begin to understand and make their own connections with material and to explore new opportunities. Thornton also sees teaching studio courses as a process of helping students tease out their own potential, to develop faith in their own instincts and to understand that the creative process requires as much self-discipline as any academic course to produce significant results. The goal of shaking up and reflecting upon accumulated perceptions which underlies Thornton's exercises for filmmaking has practical benefits for any course in which faculty wish students to move beyond the confines of assigned material and develop innovative ways of thinking about and using it.

**Marlene Malik** describes three equally important pedagogical approaches which, ideally, are taught simultaneously in her VA 10 studio classes. The first is to give information about a specific craft. In her syllabus for sculpture she writes "craft and technique are in the service of ideas and expression. Technical mini-workshops/ demos will be scheduled throughout the semester in carpentry, plaster casting and other basic studio techniques. It is important to remember that each new project creates new technical barriers..." The second is to give permission for creativity. As a result, Malik allows some assignments to have leeway for interpretation. The third is the most complex: to be able to see the work through the lens of "cultural criticism". Malik feels that students must be able to see creative work as part of a cultural context in order to understand both where their own ideas are coming from and how to disseminate them. She uses discussions of readings, taken from a variety of sources: newspaper articles, Art Journals, and writings on theory and culture, and class critiques to accomplish this goal. She constantly challenges her students with questions like "how does the artist position themselves in the late 20th century? How does our culture position the artist? What are some of the ethical issues involved in art making? What is and how important is beauty?" As a result of these questions, students form new ideas which in turn influence their work.

Malik feels that the learning which takes place in a studio dovetails with and enhances studies in other disciplines, whether anthropology, history, sociology, ethics, philosophy, engineering, or physics. She emphasizes that studio instruction requires patience and practice by students as they work through exercises designed to strengthen their abilities to observe and communicate, whether through seeing and drawing (perspective, color theory, use of different mediums) or through experiments in molecular biology. Furthermore, Malik notes that studio instruction, like academic courses

emphasizing critical thinking, also challenges assumptions: “Is there a right way to draw? What constitutes a good image? Where do illustration and drawing differ? How conscious of the intent in the work does the artist have to be? Is there a triad of artist/product/viewer? Can you have a work of art without a viewer?” As students develop the technical skills to draw a figure, they are simultaneously being encouraged to think and respond to the subject in new ways.

**Julie Strandberg** teaches TA 31 Beginning Modern Dance with Michelle Bach-Coulibaly. Strandberg teaches technical skills and Bach-Coulibaly teaches improvisational skills. Together, these permit a student to realize their own potential as dancers through three strategic educational goals: first, to provide both an intellectual knowledge of dance as a discipline of established work; second, for “each student to have a moment when they make a connection with that inner self”; and third, to develop the habit of self-assessment. To do that, Strandberg works to get students to gain access to their kinesthetic sense in order to use their bodies as a vehicle for communication. She notes that because the dance studio itself is such an alien environment for many students, it is often easier for them to strike out from the familiar in search of new modes of expression. Even within that context, the combination of improvisation and technique provides students with both an intuitive and expressive language of movement.

Like Thornton, Strandberg points that self-discipline and structure are the key to achieving good results. Assessing the quality of those results, Strandberg notes, is ongoing because faculty interact with students constantly as they perform, practice, revise, repeat, repeat and repeat until they are satisfied with the result. Furthermore, class participation is crucial to the achievement of a valid educational outcome. If a student misses class, Strandberg observes, the “material” cannot be recovered through someone else’s notes or even a videotape of the session. Lecture courses might profitably include such compelling reasons for class participation as TA 31.

**Jeff Titon** teaches ethnomusicology, such as MU 0008 Bluegrass, Country and Old Time Music. One of Titon’s goals is to help students “enter imaginatively into the experiences of someone else” as they are expressed through music. He sees both critical analysis and experience as crucial tools for understanding the meaning of musical expression, especially when it is outside a student’s personal frame of reference. Titon uses a two-part strategy. First, students must have facility with “the world of words, [which] along with observation, is the chief means toward understanding. Fieldwork involves being

there, looking, asking questions, and conversing”. Second, they may come to understanding through “musicking”, a term he attributes to Chris Small, offers certain students the opportunity to both play and respond to music creatively.

Titon’s specific goal for MU 0008 is for students to “come to understand bluegrass, old-time, and country music historically, culturally, and musically.” It is an academic course, but he offers students “the chance to learn in a variety of ways.” They are encouraged to draw upon what engages them in various styles of musical expression as a means to understanding what has engaged others. For example, Titon may get students to describe in class what they like (organic chemistry, etc.) and how they know it is worthwhile. He also offers students alternative means to complete written assignments. For example, students may choose between writing an expository essay on the ethnomusicological significance of an assigned ballad or creating a short story in which they assume the identity of a character in the ballad and respond to the events described in it. “In either instance, they consider the known historical circumstances surrounding both the ballad’s creation and the events depicted in it” which enables them to enter into it imaginatively, based on both their personal encounter with it as well as with its historical context.

**Elaine Bearer** teaches both in the medical school-biology faculty and applied music (private lessons) and an independent study music course. She directs Bio 280 Systemic Pathology, independent study for undergraduate honors biology students in her lab, and has taught Music 191 Independent Study for a number of students. She observes that both the independent study in music and the honors biology lab involve time-consuming one-on-one mentoring. MU 191 involves a close mentoring process of weekly meetings, and in the biology lab she meets with students daily.

As a musician, Bearer teaches composition. Her goal is to help the student develop the tools required to realize their imagination and the techniques needed to express their musical thoughts. To do this, she presents them with various exercises, some for the imagination and others for practice in using their tools. For example, students may be asked to sing their own composition (especially those not written for voice), to improvise on themes presented in class, or to play and sing notes verbally described by their intervals. This last exercise demonstrates the inherent fusion in teaching arts within the liberal arts curriculum, it requires that they understand the relationships between notes both intellectually and with their inner ear.

Bearer points out that teaching music composition is a very personal, individually tailored, interaction as is direction of a student's honor's project in biology. It is diametrically opposite to large classroom lecturing, and substantially different from the communal learning in a seminar. Music students have to take private sessions throughout their four years at Brown, whereas biology students only do so for one year. To Bearer, however, "teaching as Independent Study in either music or biology is diametrically opposite to lecture courses and constitutes the most valuable professor-teacher relationship at Brown." She observes that, while those faculty who direct independent study projects do so for love of teaching and not for credit, they (and their supportive departments) should be recognized for their effort and contribution to the unique educational experience at Brown.

### **A Challenge**

Does your teaching help students be the agents for their learning? Brown is immensely fortunate to have such a capable and committed arts faculty as those who shared their strategies in this article. Because the results their students produce are often concrete and/or tangible, their pedagogical strategies appear more explicit. However, many faculty in academic disciplines are also noted for their contributions to the arts as photographers, painters, composers, actors and singers. Many bring their understanding of the intuitive process to the ways in which they teach. Like their colleagues in the arts, they incorporate play, practice, and revision into their education goals for their courses. The Sheridan Center hopes that this article will inspire faculty across the disciplines to share their pedagogical strategies with their colleagues. If you have an idea to share, please e-mail, call or write the Center and we will include them in our next issue of *The Teaching Exchange*. We look forward to hearing from you.

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