Reflective Portfolio – Don Newcomb – Summer 2015

My teaching situations have been eclectic and I don't know that I can categorize my philosophy neatly for all situations. What I can do is to identify elements that I use for teaching.

> I have taught pottery, history of fashion, communications, draping, sewing, sketching, but now teach almost exclusively computer graphics.
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> I have taught at a number of New York City universities (Pratt, New School, School of Visual Arts, FIT, BMCC). I also taught in an arts program in a New York City junior high where much of what I thought about teaching and a good classroom environment was challenged.
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> Another type of teaching I would include is on-the-job training with my degree in Theater Design. So I have also had the chance to teach neophyte clowns how to sew on buttons. (Designing at Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus – Clown College)
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> On occasion I am hired by the fashion industry, most recently Marc Jacobs, to consult in Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and Dreamweaver, the computer programs which I primarily teach now in academia.

Through my teaching experiences have been quite varied in content and settings, I do follow some basic guiding principles:

People are inquisitive. The goal of education should be to encourage seeking answers, to explore, to wonder. Leading to and leaving time for exploration is a goal for my classes.

I would also say that teachers impart much by way of personal example. I show that by being prompt, prepared, organized, thereby creating professionalism in the classroom.

Patience comes in many flavors, not only with the variety of student behaviors, but also with myself. If I use an example, or create a project that is confusing or lacking in some way, I have to give myself another chance to improve, to learn and go on.

Gathering feedback is another guiding principle. From "Anyone want to see that again?" to end of the semester requests for "favorite projects, least favorite projects." Respecting their questions and remarks to help create a better classroom experience.

> Feedback example: A student told me he appreciated the review I would do at the beginning of our classes. This gave me courage. I was worried that if I repeated information, I would bore students to death.
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> But to make it a good use of class time, what I do now is review previous information and within the review time, add new information. A two-fold positive – I don't have to describe all options the first time a tool is presented, and I have additional time to expand when basics are understood.

Teaching needs to be inclusive. There are so many different ways of learning, and types of learners, so I using as many tools as possible to communicate. Some usual tools are handouts, computer files, and leading the students through classroom examples.

A common practice for me is showing an in-class assignment to give a sense of the project, then do the assignment again breaking it down in small segments so I can circle the room to give individual attention where needed throughout the exercise.

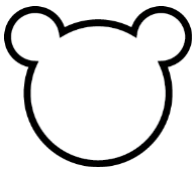
Teaching needs a positive atmosphere. Many students need encouragement. They often have a fear of making a mistake, so Control + Z (undo) is a first week item to show the students. Positive energy helps facilitate their learning process.

Some of the teaching elements I employ with are the product of a happy chance at FIT. I was first hired at FIT as a classroom assistant in the CAD area. So I was in the classroom, seeing what was connecting with the students, and what did not. I saw how students responded to some teachers' entertaining manner. From others, I saw how hesitant students could respond to encouragements. From another teacher I learned how presenting in small, achievable parts, helped lead to a completed product.

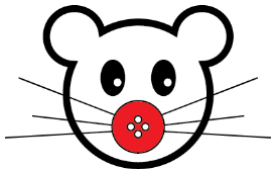
I have expanded the idea of small achievable parts leading to a finished product to add one more element for what I feel are my most successful lessons. I try to find classroom exercises that all can achieve (with guidance as needed) but can also be expanded by those who want to go further.

A simple example of this kind of lesson is making a mouse head logo in Illustrator. Tools introduced would be grouping, aligning, and pathfinders. While some students would be working on this much, I would tell faster-paced students to give the mouse a face while I working individually with students with questions.

basic exercise achieved



some students add a face



The goal for me with this kind of classroom exercise is to have students receive the sense of achievement, keep the class engaging, and allow personal exploration that will lead to individual learning.

I bring a lot of energy to my class. If I can't get excited about my subject, why should my students? And of course I end class on a high note, the Carol Burnett theme song, and after 15 weeks some even join me!

Some tools and concepts continue to be challenges to teach in computer graphics. For many years I have been trying to effectively teach the PEN TOOL, usually in the Illustrator program. Visual learners are often confused by its visual clues (handles.) The math behind it (Bezier curves) often seems counter intuitive. It can take multiple tries to get students comfortable with the PEN TOOL and so I continue to look at ways to teach that too effectively. This is one place where I am wondering if using technology to create a reference video may help the student experience.

Along with this review kind of video, I am also considering videos about subjects that I touch on briefly in class. In the fashion classes I could cover alternate flats creation, coloring techniques, the appearance menu, textile techniques, etc. Previously I have done extra information in PowerPoint or some other PDF end product, but not with sound or step-through demos that may add to the class experience. I am also looking at online teaching, so getting the most out of the technology at hand is one of my goals.

Here is the start of my videos for Illustrator:

https://vimeo.com/137157731

https://vimeo.com/137163827

https://vimeo.com/137183366

Along with my own videos, I am considering curating material from Lynda.com and other online sources for my classes. Computer graphics programs are so vast, it may help the student experience to have additional information available.

I have found that there is a wide range of student computer experience. Some students have taken up computer graphics on their own, or had high school classes in this field. Other students are not comfortable in the basics, like saving work! This is another reason I am looking a videos to help with student learning, particularly when they are working on their own.

With the idea of creating videos for the classroom, I am also thinking how to gauge the value of the videos in the student experience. Will videos lead to possibilities to further their interests? Can videos help build self-confidence to the students who review them? How much should I put into a video class review for absentee students?

I am looking at ways to get feedback on the classes in general and additional video information. I believe I can monitor how often students look at information posted on Blackboard. I am also looking into an idea of a on-line survey at the conclusion of a class-learning segment to get feedback on which elements are most helpful. In the past I have done that on paper, but perhaps I can do that with Blackboard or other online presence.

Teaching with technology needs to be generating quality learning. My classes are closely tied with technology, so the student should be leaving my class with a comfort with creating with technology, an interest in self-expression through the computer, communicating effectively on and offline, and hopefully more employable!

I have seen a lot of the workflow change over the years, and it seems to me that our students need to consider the workflow of the future. They may find themselves at home workers, or on a team that is scattered over multiple locales. This may change the workplace in the future, but even with these new situations existing, traditional student skills continue to need evaluation - competency, time management, and communications skills. Perhaps technology can help generate a way to evaluate these skills.