

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

My pedagogy reflects the idea that the classroom is an environment to stimulate thought and discovery. Providing a student-centered learning environment structured around the creative process is my primary objective. This empowers students to think critically, generate ideas and evaluate their work within a supportive framework.

A core principle is that students develop the ability to critically think and solve a design problem. Establishing an individual process and method of thinking gives students a means to accomplish this. As they move through the process iteratively, it becomes a foundation upon which one can expand.

An introductory course that all design students are required to take, *Form & Concept*, illustrates this point well. At the beginning of the course, I introduce students to the fundamentals of design through the reading of *Paul Rand: Without Contrast You're Dead*. Walking through examples and encouraging interaction within the class sets a foundation for students' first assignment, to design an 8-page booklet which reflects their engagement with the principles. I demonstrate both a divergent and convergent method of working similar to IDEO's design process. Discussing the starting point as diverging on 1) research (providing a starting point and body of knowledge on the principles at hand and how others have solved the problem), converging on 2) an idea (after brainstorming and sketching through analysis of research), diverging on 3) methods and techniques to implement that idea (problem-solving), converging on 4) the strongest implementation (after synthesis concept and form), and 5) pushing the project to completion by constructively evaluating the overall effort. For the entire semester, I repeat this process to strengthen critical thought and effective execution. By the final project (poster triptych) the students have internalized the process and can progress through the steps intuitively.

It is important to empower students with the ability to generate, evaluate, and revise high-quality ideas. Establishing a supportive, and encouraging studio environment, gives students a self-driven space to conduct in-depth research of topics, experience failure in their process, and articulate their knowledge in critique.

In my upper-level *Context and Process* course, I assign a Pedal Art poster project. To help students understand the project, I show examples of Art Crank and encourage them to engage in extra-curricular research about the Des Moines Pedal Art Show. During the next class, the students summarize their efforts and I facilitate a group-wide sketching exercise to capture new ideas and directions. To build on their body of knowledge and methods of working we proceed to experimental research. Bringing bicycles into class, I had students provide 50 aspects of a bicycle rather than the whole. The goal is to distill the concept into distinct 1.5" squares using photography, video, and found material to generate a set of alternative viewpoints of what a bicycle "is". The next exercise prompted students to layer images and type torn from book covers on the photocopier allowing the functionality of the machine to generate a composite image. The idea here was to effectively constrict the process to two-dimensions and challenging students to create a compelling image from a hodge-podge of materials, developing their intuition on how an ephemeral idea can become concrete, and demonstrating a mastery of design principles. The final exercise challenged them to build a three-dimensional object related to their experiences related to a bicycle. The idea here was to incorporate a personal memory and push them to translate a concept into a tangible form.

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Once these were completed, students were tasked with designing a Pedal Art poster using elements from their experimental research. This process was deliberate in guiding and showing students how to generate a range of ideas for one problem on a topic of local interest. Providing a supportive and structured space in critique, I encourage students to articulate their knowledge of design principles and discuss their collective challenges, failures, and successes. For this project, failures generating an accidentally interesting novel idea/image/effect were viewed as experiments that went awry, rather than a discouraging step in the wrong direction. I stress this as a crucial principle that the process is commonly non-linear and to embrace serendipity when it occurs. By giving them permission to fail, it decentralized the “generation” step and allowed them space to experiment in a digital format with all its distinctions relative to analog. Successes resulted in surprising visuals which sparked discussions about techniques, fabrication methods, and compositional successes.

By being open and accessible to students, I am able to switch roles between facilitator, learner, and mentor. As an example, in *Typography*, I assigned an event mailer project where a graphic design minor student was struggling to build a box to house their invite. Through open-ended questions and discussion, I found they had not taken *3-D Design* and, therefore, lacked fabrication skills. In a collaborative activity, I showed them, step-by-step, how to measure, cut, and assemble a box for their invite which removed their barrier to completion. In *Advanced Web*, I built in lab days for students to identify code they would like to learn or existing code they wanted to incorporate and master. Many of those lab days, I was actively engaged alongside them as a student. In *Practicum*, I encouraged students to work through the process to craft their individual brand and construct their portfolios. As a practical aspect of the classes, I focused some content on job hunting and freelance work to help students realize an initial role in the design world. Throughout the whole course, I was able to draw on my ten plus years as a designer to answer questions about job searching, applying to jobs, interviewing techniques, and salary negotiations.

As a professor, I structure my courses with plenty of one-on-one interactions which are sustained across the semester allowing a rapport to develop between the students and myself. My studio courses are organized to encourage interpersonal communication with group work and well-structured critiques. I strive to incorporate skills such as motivation, persistence, and diligence into project work. I value learning for the sake of learning by self-driven research and staying connected to the industry to remain current. I also find being an effective educator requires preparation and “being present” in my classes. At the end of each project and semester, I ask students for their feedback on the project and the overall course. These discussions help me to improve my craft in both theory and practice and I want to learn, along with students, through handling successes and failures as an integral part of the creative process.

My ultimate goal as an educator is to mold students into engaged thinkers and problem solvers who will continue to be inspired by their discoveries through the design process. My methodology of being an actively involved participant in the overall process and experience ensures that I am also continually molded and never stop growing.