
APRIL DAWN FRIGES

Teaching Philosophy

I am proud of keeping my teaching skills at the forefront of student learning methodologies and consider myself an agent of change in fine art education. As an MFA Pedagogical Fellow at the University of California, Irvine, I completed a year-long fellowship program, which afforded me advanced teaching skills, self-confidence, and an in-depth understanding between teaching practices and student learning. I began at Point Park University in 2013 and continue to implement important issues in higher education today, such as course and instructional design, inclusive classrooms, pedagogical technology and assessment. Serving eight years as coordinator and fifteen as a professor have given me the amazing opportunity to put those issues into practice, while steadily perfecting them over time.

My teaching objective is to prepare students for a career in studio/visual art practices. I also know that not all students seeking a degree in photography aim to be strictly exhibition artists. Regardless of their professional goals, I aspire to teach them to consider art as a tool for creative thinking and problem solving across various disciplines. In the arts, there is never one way of doing or looking at anything. This type of practice differs from a classic teacher/student role. I challenge students to ask questions, be courageous, counter my thoughts and think outside the box. Being a mentor to me means helping students develop ways to look at themselves with expressive communication.

I do not believe in authoritarian methods for a productive learning environment, so my classrooms tend to be student-centered. This facilitates self-directed student learning, self-efficacy, and long-term goals. With this way of teaching, I find that in a critique setting, students have the tools to become critical thinkers. I don't teach in traditional classrooms; my non-computer courses are in round-table classrooms, creating a comfortable community feel. I try to refrain from being the lecturer at the podium as much as possible.

It is my objective to create classes that engage progressive and increasingly complex levels of learning and knowledge application. During my time as coordinator, I revamped the curriculum of the BFA photography program to progress that way as well; beginning with courses that are designed to introduce students to information, ideas, and genres of thought, and increasing the level of discourse and intellectual independence to include synthesis and analysis as students move through the curriculum. Under my curriculum redesign, students discover the underpinnings of modern photographic practices by starting with the basics: the history of art, history of photography, physics of light, composition, and technical photographic tools. In the 100-300 level courses, emphasis is on the postmodern, learning the language of critique and intermediate technical tools. I focus on themes that are evident in both historic and contemporary photographic practice, often making comparisons to the two: The Icon (reinterpreting artist's work), tableaux (narrative loaded into a single frame), Deadpan (a deliberately impassive image) and repetitive act (a series of photographs that add up to one concept) to name a few exercises. Looking at contemporary and historical visual art is integrated into instruction methods and critique. There is an intersection of 300-400 level courses where these rudimentary techniques meet student-driven reinterpretations.

In the past decade, digital technology has challenged traditional artistic techniques and helps define our thoughts, lifestyles, cultural identities, and appearance. It is necessary to adapt and address contemporary issues of art and society, which is the main theme of my more advanced courses. Such subjects can be political, economic, or cross-cultural issues that we encounter in everyday life. Students reexamine the physical and material properties of photography in the advanced 400+ courses, and are gaining their individual voice while preparing themselves for a career after school. It is here that discussions of appropriation and photographic exploitation of the term "image" act to reevaluate the very nature of photography. Junior level PHOT 400: *Photo Art Marketing* I designed in 2014, after I personally completed the [Creative Capital Curriculum](#) to help launch my own art practice. It has become an essential course for portfolio creation and professionalism; students practice artspeak, and create a fluid identity within their

practice. Finally, the capstone, *Senior Thesis I* and *II* is a full-year course that revolves around high impact practices and experiential learning. This includes off-site, student engagement within the community: holding exhibitions, visiting artist' studios, working at Silver Eye Center for Photography as (paid) student scholars (for internship credit), and having a larger presence in our visiting artist lecture series by engaging in portfolio reviews. Discussion about continuing education is a topic that is introduced and exercised throughout the final two years.

I continuously strive to adjust my methods of teaching to keep up with student learning styles. During the pandemic, teaching remotely, forced me to integrate teaching styles that I didn't see feasible in art education. For instance, every student in my view camera class had a 4 x 5 film camera at home with them, but issues of students living far from campus forced me to recognize the importance of outsourcing film and putting more emphasis into more creative post-production methods. I found students were more inclined to shoot slide film (for scanning), a process I had never considered because we print and develop in-house. I learned even courses that I have long-established can benefit from changing pedagogical styles, especially in the methodology of critique.

I believe that lived experiences in the profession (like professional portfolio reviews, art residencies, etc.) is imperative not just to faculty research, but to demonstrate to students how these practices are conducted. This form of knowledge-building is passed on across all of my courses. As a professor of contemporary issues and contemporary practice courses, I think it is ever important to emphasize both conceptual and practical aspects of the art world, and to provide students with the tools necessary for applying the theoretical knowledge learned in class to the 'real world' with practical applications outside of the classroom. High impact practices and experiential learning is the core of the program I developed as coordinator at Point Park University because the professional art community is about creating and maintaining relationships.

I am constantly in search of idiosyncratic ways to help students not just stay focused, but genuinely engage in the tools I teach. Early on in the classroom, emphasis is in the fundamentals; techniques and technology - how they can be applied to a wide array of personal and professional pursuits. In students exercises on the vocabulary of a digital or analog camera for example, I parody the game *Jeopardy*, created within PowerPoint, as an ideal method of reinforcing the technical language necessary to operate the apparatus. It creates a fun and collaborative atmosphere (students play in two teams) with an eagerness to learn (as well as candy, and free film). We come together with kinesthetic (the camera), visual (PowerPoint), auditory (I describe, and we do an exercise together), and with reading/writing (slide notes available for reference for exams), for a deeper understanding so students can master technique, allowing for different levels of cognition.

The most powerful thread in a student's art education is when peer criticism of a piece of work may not conform to the intent and expectation of the creator. Critique is a way to explore and consider multiple points of view, but it is often difficult for introductory level college students (and non-art majors), to provide constructive criticism without sacrifice. When asked in private advising sessions, students continuously explained their disengagement from critique because they felt shy, inadequate in their perspective, or simply don't feel comfortable taking the risk of ownership for their point of view.

In 2023, my teaching method toward creating student-centered critiques will be published in a book titled *Do We Have To Call It Critique? Reimagining The Tradition: More Inclusive, More Fulfilling And Maybe A Little More Fun*. Chapter 4, "Reimagining Art + Design Education" includes my pedagogical technique: "Methods Of Engagement In Critique: Constructing An Active, Student-Centered Learning Environment." I have developed a non-threatening method that helps build an understanding of the critique process for introductory-level students. It supports an active, inclusive learning environment where students can grow their vocabulary and participate in meaningful discussions that promote openness between participants. It also ensures that all students' work is discussed because the format allows for balanced engagement. Students learn to discuss topics such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, and identity in a thoughtful, non-

judgmental way (Friges, 120). The longer and more comfortable I personally get with varying subjects as an educator in the arts, the further away I get from remembering how hard it is to approach this critical aspect that comes with verbalizing visual literacy. As a result of all these contributing issues, I simply hand out many colorful index cards before every critique, which ask the students to engage in our conversation with an answer to the question in their hands. The student may read aloud directly from the card, asking others for the answer, or spend time reasoning with the concept privately and working toward figuring out how to use it within the context of their peers' work. Some note cards even ask students to speak up first, last, and even after someone else (to help build upon collaborative thinking). It ensures a consistent flow with less drag and more momentum. This exercise requires students to be on their toes, to be present, and it holds them accountable. Most importantly, my own interpretation becomes secondary and allows for peer engagement. Critiques becomes student-centered, benefiting both students and faculty. Creating the content within this student-centered method in pedagogy lies within the format of the questions, I consider the following possibilities applicable to any fine art genre. The cards serve as a guide for the students to consider their own physical awareness of the medium, concept and contemporary issues that may surround the identity of the artist and/or their subject.

These notecards are separated into five distinct categories

- initial response questions (I)
 - relate/compare to others initial responses and their own immediate reaction to the work
- factual questions (F)
 - explain what they see, to strengthen visual communication skills
- analytical questions (A)
 - identify relationships, similarities, suggest and propose possible meanings, exploring why and how something has come about
- marginalized questions (M)
 - examine identity, meaning and responsibility, institutional biases, misrepresentations and underrepresented subjects
- speculative questions (S)
 - test other possibilities, proposing alternatives, hypothesizing, imagining, and transporting.

While it is important to customize the content of each syllabus to the type of class being offered, there are pedagogical ideas and concerns that can be applied to all class types. I strive to incorporate assignments and modes of instruction that accommodate as many learning styles as possible (considering Neil D. Fleming's Gardner's VARK Model of learning – Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing and Kinesthetic) and consider multi-modal learners. I also structure my classes so that the content of the individual assignments as well as the overall course provide micro and macro models for the learning domains of Bloom's Taxonomy, as they progress from receiving and remembering knowledge through analyzing synthesizing, evaluating and creating.

While in graduate school at UC Irvine, I was mentored by early west coast feminist thinkers such as Yvonne Rainer, Martha Gever, Sally Stein, Julie Carson, Connie Samaras and Catherine Lord, who modeled and reflected what some people (such as Judy Chicago) has referred to as *consciousness raising*. Chicago outlines that Empowerment Education begins with the process of helping students to become empowered to do what is important to them in their art.¹ In my graduate Gender + Sexuality Studies discourse, I distinctly recall discussing gender-neutral bathrooms in-depth, wondering if we were all attempting to persuade the persuaded and couldn't quite understand where this discourse fit within my own life. It wasn't until I began teaching at Point Park University in 2013, and where I could stand on Diversity + Inclusion committees within my own institution, that I fully understood how my own education and influence can help those who are marginalized. This consistent empowerment training is why I chose to begin my tenure in Pittsburgh, at a liberal arts university. I'm proud to be a part of the initiatives that pave

¹ Keifer-Body, K. *From Content to Form: Judy Chicago's Pedagogy*, 2007 National Art Education Association (Studies in Art Education)

the way for change. By the end of their undergraduate degree, I want students to feel comfortable with the tools that I teach, to be able to take critical thinking skills into their everyday lives. No matter their socioeconomic background, I want students to feel confident that they can contribute and challenge our creative world.