Ron Amato
REFLECTIVE TEACHING PORTFOLIO

Teaching Philosophy

I approach photography education as a guide. Drawing on many years of experience and education, I help students realize individual potential through thoughtful critique and strong guidance. Each student is an individual artist with a unique perspective and approach to their craft. My role is of someone who can help them achieve their individual goals without trying to shape them to my vision of who they should be. This approach often reveals potential in individual students they hadn't previously recognize in themselves. Knowing when to apply some pressure and when to back away is crucial to nurturing the growth of students. While all students are given the same or similar tasks, knowing where to set expectations for individual students can often help them flourish and achieve. Reaching those expectations can be intoxicating and result in them pushing beyond the original goal.

There is an emphasis on liberal arts, current events and world citizenship in my classroom. I believe to truly be an effective communicator through the visual arts, one must be well informed with regard to history, politics and culture. The goal is to have students see beyond trends, and have a broad view of the world. In the current environment of an image saturated social media, it is ever more important for image-makers to be well rounded and educated. Making work that speaks to the zeitgeist of a particular segment of the population will make an artist successful no matter if the images are intended to sell clothing or document news.

I believe by empowering students to truly be who they are, you overcome barriers to learning and growth. I embrace and encourage students to make art that is important to who they are, nurturing a passion for visual expression. I take seriously my position as a positive gay role model for students who are struggling with identity. I know first hand being a role model has empowered students to be proud of who they are and therefore make images that are richer and more meaningful. The environment in the photography department in general is more welcoming of students making a diversity of work than it was ten years ago. I believe I have contributed to that change.

My professional practice directly influences my teaching practice. I cannot be effective in the classroom if I am not making work as an artist. From a pragmatic point of view, the connection is easy. Putting latest technologies and best practices to use on a regular basis, of course, has a direct correlation to my effectiveness demonstrating those technologies and practices in the classroom. However, my staying active in my discipline has other benefits to my students that are harder to quantify. I can truly interact with them as a peer. I am often grappling with the same questions they are with regard to making work. What am I trying to communicate? Who is

my audience? How do I go deeper into the work to make it a richer experience to the audience? Why is what I am doing not working? What changes do I make to get closer to a result that effectively communicates my goals and intention? Positioning myself to share these concerns with students breaks down barriers between us, makes me more empathetic to student struggles and helps build community within the classroom.

Finally, I see the learning as a two way street. I learn everyday from my students. I understand that the conversation in the room is just that, a conversation, and student opinions and perspectives are just as valid as mine. This has been a freeing experience. Staying open and ready to receive makes me a better educator and grow as an artist and human being. Not only has my teaching evolved because of this approach, but my personal work has as well. I have a true passion for learning and my position as an educator helps feed that passion.

Example of Successful Lesson

I am a real believer in creating an interactive classroom. I believe students learn best when they are engaged both mentally and physically. Early on in teaching digital photography and Photoshop, I realized many of the concepts were difficult to grasp through a traditional lecture. A particular problem students were having was understanding histograms. Histograms are a graphical representation of the tones within a photograph. I knew I needed to come up with a way for them to fundamentally understand histograms before we could move on to other concepts. It was real conundrum. Then I thought of something. I wasn't sure if it would work but decided to try it. I created a game. I load up 25 images on a computer and project them one by one. Each student in turn goes up to the white board and draws what they think the histogram for the image projected would be. Then I reveal the histogram in Photoshop to see how close they come. The lesson was an immediately successful, so much so that students want to keep going after the 25 images were done. A number of my colleagues in the photography department have adopted the lesson.

Understanding the population and the way they learn is key to success in the classroom. For the most part, photography students are visual learners. This explains the success of a lesson such as the histogram lesson. Finding ways to engage the students with visuals or have them interact with the visual tools in the classroom is always my goal. My most unsuccessful lessons have been when I am talking too long without interaction or feedback from the students.

Technology in the Classroom

Technology plays a large role in my discipline; therefore, it plays a large role in my classroom. Besides demonstrating up-to-the-minute photographic technology and its uses, I use technology in creative ways to deliver course content. I use tethered image capture to project live lighting demonstrations and stream live video to project lectures on the proper use of cameras. I find

with large class sizes these tools help engage students who may not be able to see intricate camera menus and lighting subtleties from a distance.

In addition to using Blackboard, I build complex websites in Google Sites to deliver course materials and augment instruction. Google Sites is a less cumbersome interface and has a wide variety of tools not offered by Blackboard. This especially true when on location during my study abroad course. Quite often there are difficulties abroad connecting to Blackboard. We have never had that issue with a Google Site. Anything confidential, such as grades stays behind the wall on Blackboard.

I am a robust user of many Google Apps for course presentation and content. I use Google Drive in all my courses to collect student work. It is especially useful for high-resolution photographs. Google Slide presentations integrate nicely into the Google Sites interface. Google Docs allows me to mark up a paper without having a hard copy or needing to use email. Google Form is great for capturing information from students for almost anything from answering a single question to getting in depth background on their experience.

With all this said, I am on a constant quest for new tools to be more efficient and effective in delivering course content.

Implementation of Workshop Topics

The Teaching with Technology workshop has made me aware of some of the more interactive features on Blackboard. In general I find the Blackboard interface to be non-intuitive. Having instruction in some of the features was incredibly helpful. Some of the features I found particularly helpful are the ability to embed Lynda.com tutorials and LibGuides. I have been flipping my classroom for a long time and using Lynda.com to replace traditional textbooks since FIT first provided access. However it's been a cumbersome process. The integration of Lynda tutorials within the Blackboard interface is a game changer for me. It helps make me more efficient and provide easier access for my students.

Voicethread is something I have been interested in for a long time but hadn't been exposed to it. Seeing it demonstrated in the workshop has cleared up some mystery and questions around its use. Having the mobile app is also extremely helpful. The interactivity is something I value and strive for in the classroom and beyond. So far I have only dabbled in this technology but look forward to using it in a more meaningful way in the future.

I believe that adding these additional tools to my classroom environment will provide students with a more robust educational experience. I want to take advantage of anything that creates advantages and encourages success. I understand that each of these tools may not be successful. Based on student success with individual assignments and actives, and student feedback, I will be able to adequately evaluate the effectiveness of each tool.

<u>The Bigger Picture</u>

Social media can be a powerful tool to break down the walls of the classroom and bring the learning environment into the virtual world. The most obvious example of this is during the teaching of the photography study abroad course. Students are required the blog regularly during the course, sharing their images and experiences with the global community. I was also an early adopter of Twitter for expanding the walls of the classroom into a virtual environment. Now that tool has been replaced Instagram. In multiple classes I create unique hashtags for students to use when posting for the class. This allows students to share work with each other and the larger community. By clicking on one of the hashtags, all the work for a particular assignment is displayed. Through comments, students are able to have discussions about class content beyond the classroom. Many of my students create Facebook groups to build collaboration. More recently I have been encouraging a move to Google Hangouts for this purpose. Google Hangouts provides a video conferencing tool I have find very useful for group meetings when not all students can be present. All these tools have changed my approach to teaching and education. While the traditional classroom still has its place, I am interested in any tool to increase student engagement and meet them on their own terms.