

Leslie Blum – Reflective Teaching Portfolio – May 2017

1. Define your teaching philosophy.

I teach very different courses, some studio and some lecture, two in the freshman year, one in the junior year and two in the senior year.

The classes are:

CD235 Design History

CD215 Design Studio 2

GD334 Experiential Graphic Design

GD491 Internship

GD494 Senior Research Project (online for Study Abroad Students)

As you can see, it is quite a range of classes that span the four years.

The style that I use for each is somewhat different. For the studio courses, I support, “learning by doing”, what is often referred to as “experiential learning”. A problem is introduced, some background information necessary to accomplish the project might be shared with the students, but it is up to the students to explore and experiment in order to solve the problem. Along the way feedback is provided, both by me and the other students, to help each of them improve their projects. I try to avoid “art directing” the students’ work and allow them to learn through trial and error, building upon what they learn through each phase. For the lecture, or academic course, I attempt to present information and then pose a question, one that has no right or wrong answer. The students need to take a position and defend it through logical arguments and often, images that support their ideas.

2. Have you ever observed a master teacher? If the answer is yes, what do you recall most from the experience?

I’m not sure I’ve ever observed master teacher, but when I observe other faculty as part of our tenure and promotion process, I come away with new ideas about how to present material, frame a problem and engage the students.

3. Give an example of your most successful lesson. Why do you feel it was successful?

There are two examples that come to mind. The first is a lecture/demonstration where I show the students actual maps produced for the Nation Parks Service that uses the Unigrid developed by Massimo Vignelli. The students can see the elements that create a system, they understand how the page sizes all relate to the same grid, the type and layout a consistent yet there is tremendous variety and customization for each National Park. See the real thing, live, demonstrates the relationships better than seeing them in slides.

The other really successful activity was a discussion in the design history class after I read a quote by Aldous Huxley about the work of McKnight Kauffer, extolling Kauffer's use of symbolism instead of sex to sell a product. That discussion generates some very interesting and revealing comments and is extremely lively. Everyone seems to have an opinion about the relative merit of using sex to sell.

4. Do you have an example of an unsuccessful lesson? How did you address the challenges?

Where do I begin? I think that sometimes my assignments are too open ended, hoping that by not providing specific parameters students will move beyond standard solutions; they won't be constrained by pre-conceived ideas. That works really well with some students, but not with all of them. So I have added more descriptions and explanations for those assignments.

I also tried using VoiceThread for a project where one student would test another student's map. The students were quite overwhelmed with the learning curve necessary and were intimidated about recording their ideas rather than writing them. That was a real surprise because most students seem dislike writing and be more comfortable talking about their ideas.

Last semester in the Design History class I tried asking the students to develop a question based on the lecture that day. I thought I had explained that the question needed to be one that could be argued from either side, could not be answered with a "yes" or "no" or a simple fact. It was a disaster. The students could not come up with open-ended questions, ones that required developing a point of view and a supportive argument. For the next class we all worked together to develop questions. I pointed out what kind of questions were appropriate and what kinds of questions were too simple to answer. It helped, but I still think that the assignment was too advanced for the level of the students.

5. Why are you introducing and/or expanding the use of technology into your teaching?

I was one of the first group of faculty who taught an online class. I see the incredible possibilities that online learning offers in terms of the richness of the experience. I use Blackboard extensively and have also used a shared class Google folder to share information with the class. I'm very excited about the potential of VoiceThread for design critiques, in addition to the presentation of material and submission of visual assignments.

6. How do you feel these technology innovations will affect the student experience? How do you think it will affect your experience?

I think that we overestimate how easily students learn new technology. We assume that because they are digital natives, they are comfortable with new interfaces. I was surprised how much the students this year resisted doing the VoiceThread critique. I had thought it would make their lives easier but obviously not.

As for my experience, I'm always ready to learn new things, not just for the sake of learning them but to enhance the student experience and to make my life easier. But technology doesn't always do that. Setting up an online course, a VoiceThread lecture or assignment or even a Blackboard shell requires a lot of work, attention to detail and constant review to confirm that links work properly, due dates are correct and the other myriad items that need to be monitored to make sure that they students understand and that the course shell functions in a friendly, helpful way and does not intimidate or confuse students

7. Please describe new teaching ideas you plan to implement as a result of this technology certificate program.

As I mentioned, I'm excited to try using VoiceThread and plan to incorporate lectures into the Design History class as well for assignments. I plan to explore the potential for VoiceThread to be used for critiques, especially as a way for students to get feedback between classes.

I'm also hoping to work with Lynda.com to develop a course on wayfinding that my GD334 students can access.

While I do use some of the techniques of the flipped classroom on the design history class, I would like to push that further, sharing a VoiceThread lecture in advance, giving a quick quiz at the beginning and posing questions that force the students to make connections with the material that was presented. Rote learning, memorizing dates and names, is not the way that students will incorporate design history, understand the impact of technical advances and be inspired by the work of great designers.

8. How will these new technology tools/approaches contribute to your classroom practice?

Little by little I've been integrating many of the tools that are offered at FIT into my various classes. I will try to limit the number of new tools/techniques that I introduce so that I can evaluate the success of each individually and not dilute the impact of any one techniques.

9. How will you evaluate the success of your activities?

I always base the success of my teaching on the success of the students. If a majority of the class misses the point of the assignment, then it is my failure to communicate it clearly or that my expectations were not realistic.

With only a few exceptions, there isn't an assignment or lecture that I've presented in the same way twice, as I am always learning new things that I want to communicate to the students or am revising based on student feedback or performance. I would love to find a way to identify what is "successful" beyond the very seat of the pants method I've traditionally used.

10. What do you consider to be the bigger picture items with regard to technology and learning?

There is the danger that the point of a lesson or an assignment will get lost or overwhelmed by the technology that is used to realize it. We also have to be realistic about what the students bring to the classroom, both in experience and expertise, because we have such a diverse student body. Not necessarily in terms of race or gender but in background and skills. It's also important to keep in mind the limits of technology in terms of interaction in the class and the student teacher relationship.