

Peter Ellenstein

Teaching Philosophy and Diversity Statement

I believe our job as teachers is not just to impart knowledge, but to help in developing a successful learner and citizen in the world. Commitment, discipline, creativity, cooperation, respect, willingness to dive-in and make mistakes, and openness to new ideas and methods are absolutely necessary to the development of every creative artist, especially in collaborative fields. These same skills will serve a student throughout life in almost every other job or relationship, so if we can help the student develop these skills, they will be valuable regardless of their eventual life choices.

No matter what ethnicity, religion or local surroundings, human beings use the same basic tools of mind, body, voice and emotion to express their meaning. Theatre tells stories that speak to the community of artists and citizens. Despite outward expression, basic human needs, emotions, frustrations, joys, sorrows and triumphs are universal. Great theatre, pierces the outward shell of the audience and resonates within the soul, unlocking the mind. Empathy, finding the connecting junctures and entry points between cultures that release the outer defenses and connect our common humanity, is one of the main goals of all art. The training goal is helping students of different backgrounds develop the tools to reach within themselves, understand others and finally to reach the audience. Earning the trust of students is the first step in this process. The teachers must first demonstrate the empathy to forge bonds with students of diverse backgrounds. Once trust is developed, the collaborative process can take place.

Theatre is both an art and a craft. In teaching, one wants to inspire to the art and teach the skills of the craft. There is no right way to do anything. The only proof of what works is in the result, and therefore, I try to give my students exposure to as many techniques as possible; tailoring the different methods and traditions to the particular need, personality and learning style for the student. In this way I am complimentary with most “methods”. I don’t teach from a single book in any of my classes, though I offer them as references. The books are useful from a reference point of view and to fill out ideas that have been broached in class.

I hope to learn from my students as well. I am always surprised how much more there is to know and learn. If I can keep an open mind; recognizing that “this is my truth *now*,” then I can stay creative. The arts are subjective, and we teach guidelines (or best practices), rather than hard and fast rules. If I can maintain this attitude, then I can expect it from my students

I believe that all students are different, and many require special handling, but certain expectations are givens; it hurts everyone to allow one person’s lack of responsibility to damage an entire group or project. I believe college is where we help these students clarify and develop their attitude towards work and relationships and life. We do no favors if we reward bad behavior, but unlike the real-world, we can wipe the slate clean and offer a student who has made errors of judgment a fresh start on a new project. We teach people how to treat us.

I deal with my students as fellow artists, and my grading is entirely based on attendance, participation and earnest effort outside of class which is easy to detect. While show business may reward artists simply for talent, I feel it is my job, as their teacher to reward them for effort

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and the development of a good work ethic and ability to collaborate. As a very small percentage of students actually go on to make their primary living as performers, the craft, research, discipline, good will, kindness, self-reflection, entrepreneurialism, collaboration and responsibility to the greater good are the tools that will serve the students after graduation in both life and work.

I believe strongly in cross-disciplinary work. The arts flourish when they don't exist in a vacuum. Music and Art and Dance and Theatre cross-pollinate. As does literature, design, engineering, philosophy, psychology and sociology. Since the arts are about expression of life, human relations and our world, it is important for artists to step outside the cocoon and bring new experiences and ideas into their work. So I urge students to work with those in other disciplines, create joint-projects and explore themes in different art forms. This can often result in cross-curricular activities that benefit the larger campus and community. Approaching issues and ideas from many perspectives is something the arts do very well. I encourage students to bring life into their art and vice-versa. Finally I hope to teach the students to take great joy and pride in the hard, good work of studying and making art.