

Heather Davis

Teaching Philosophy

My love of teaching extends from a love of learning. As an educator, I act as a guide and a listener – as a role model inside and outside of the classroom. Through exploration and a rigorous curriculum, I encourage students to discover and exceed the boundaries of the material, as they push through the subconscious boundaries that might exist within and prepare for a successful career in the arts. I want my students, at the end of each course, to look back and be surprised by the heights of their technical, aesthetic and creative accomplishments.

Each student will enter the classroom space with his or her own challenges, learning style and personality. I take care to apply individualized attention, and endeavor to understand and meet each student's needs. I use a range of pedagogical methods, remaining flexible and open to adaptation. As students mature in their work, their learning style can change, and my pedagogy must evolve to meet their growth.

Technical and observational skills are essential to the successful execution of a concept. Assignments are designed to create excitement and personal investment through conceptual prompts so that students are internally driven to work through the idiosyncrasies of an unfamiliar media, or to tackle the challenges that are inherent to building a new skill. As they progress in their learning, students develop self-reliant decision making. Ambition and active engagement in their own learning are expected from successful students, and this expectation is made clear both through classroom encouragement and in the grading rubric.

A developed vocabulary grants students a more nuanced comprehension of their own work, expanding the collection of tools in their conceptual toolboxes. Students must apply the rhetoric of the principles of design to an analysis of, through writing projects and class critiques, the work they have accomplished during the course, the work of their peers, and a single work of an advanced professional artist. These activities strengthen the ability to self-evaluate, create cohesive critical assessments, and learn how to build upon the successes of past projects.

Inspiration for each project comes to students through sketching, journaling, brainstorming, and by viewing the accomplishments of other artists. I bring intercultural exploration into the learning space, sharing from near and far in space and time – for example, discussing the anthropological link

between cave paintings and graffiti, or analyzing the difference between European and Eastern understanding of space and perspective – building an intercultural context as scaffolding for complex concepts. We compare the Japanese concept of Ma (emptiness) with the concept of Horror Vacui employed by outsider and folk artists. We talk about the artists who made the rules (the Renaissance Masters of perspective), broke the rules (Fred Olsen, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Ai Weiwei), and pushed against convention (Kara Walker, Deanna Lawson, Yayoi Kusama).

The studio atmosphere is enriched through engagement with the local art community, and with the culture that surrounds the microcosm of a school setting. For one field trip to the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston from Dartmouth, MA, though most of the students grew up in the suburbs of Boston, many had never explored the heart of the city, or ridden the transit system. We parked at a suburban subway station and took the T into the city, stopping by China Town for Dim Sum on the way. These kinds of explorations enrich life and embolden students, stretching their conceptual scope from myopic to scenic. As museum tours were inadvisable for Fall 2020, for each of my courses I dedicated a portion of one class session to a group virtual museum tour along with a discussion board assignment, thus simulating the shared experience of an off-campus adventure.

When Curry College's campus closed in March of 2020 and classes moved to synchronous online instruction, a sudden shift in pedagogy was imperative to challenge students to continue to meet the learning objectives of the course from their kitchen tables, living rooms and study desks. For Ceramics I and II, each student purchased oil-based modeling clay, and I quickly devised a set of new projects that would challenge their imaginations and observational skills, many of which exceeded my expectations. For these classes and for Drawing, I recorded instructional videos that students could slow down, pause or watch multiple times as they developed their projects. In-process critiques became essential. For both Drawing and Ceramics that semester, critiques were held synchronously during class time. While listening to comments from classmates and myself, students wrote responses to each work on the discussion board where images of the coursework were posted. This method I found to be more advantageous than previously, as it seemed more egalitarian. For classes that met in person in Fall 2020, I continued using the discussion boards for critique comments, which turned out to be advantageous for those who were restricted from campus and who were zooming in to class.

A Summer 2020 course meant to be in person was shifted to online asynchronous delivery. This introductory course was mostly lecture, peppered with hands-on activities to drive home the

concepts. For this class, I recorded slide lectures and technical videos, and held open zoom office hours for students to drop in to ask questions, discuss concepts, share thoughts, and hold critiques. Discussion board assignments served as a cohesive influence on the atmosphere of the course.

For Fall 2020, Curry delivered most courses in person, socially distanced. Not knowing if or when campus would be closed, or how suddenly, I prepared for any eventuality. Two of my courses were socially distanced in two neighboring classrooms, linked by special microphones through zoom, and one was delivered synchronously online due to lack of classroom space. I fully developed each course online and put zoom links in place. Campus remained open, but when students began to test positive, and when a dorm was quarantined, and then another dorm was sent home, all were able to fully participate in class. Certainly, the events of 2020 required quick thinking, flexibility and creative solutions, all of which are key to my pedagogy.

Exploration is the central theme in my professional practice that most informs my pedagogy. Pairing the ancient practice of ceramics with the contemporary media of video transcends the boundaries usually marked out for both, and I constantly experiment with new ways to break old assumptions. I am eager to discover new developments in the ceramics field, to participate in the living language of artmaking in the art community from local to international, and to share my work through exhibits and collaborative projects. The passion that exudes from the emerging artists in my classrooms fuels the excitement I feel in the studio about the act of making, and the act of being a maker, as a foil to the hands-off atmosphere that has a tendency to prominence in our culture. With these qualities, I strive to bring to my students the best possible education I can offer.