

Teaching Philosophy

My perspective on teaching changed in my first semester of graduate school. In my acting class one day, after doing some scene work, we were discussing how difficult it was to maintain the thought process of our characters without being interrupted by our own judgment of our performance. Rather than simply instructing us to work harder at maintaining the character's inner monologue my professor instead started confessing how much trouble he personally had with that himself. Suddenly my professor was fallible, human, and struggling with the same thing I, the student, was. By showing his flaws, my professor gave me permission to let myself learn. That is now the teacher I strive to be. By showing myself as fallible and struggling with the same issues as my students, I give them permission to not be perfect, releasing them from that expectation in themselves, and enabling them to grow.

The mantra that I want my students to leave my class knowing is: forgive yourself, and return to the present. I want to instill my students with the confidence they need to be willing to fail, to brush themselves off, and to try again. I teach my students that it's not a failure, its part of the process. In improv comedy this is critical. If the student missed a cue from their partner and they are beating themselves up over it, then they will surely miss the next cue while they are busy criticizing themselves. In stage combat, if I am thinking about the move I just messed up then I am almost guaranteed to mess up another. In an acting audition, the hardest judge in the room is yourself. If the student can immediately forgive him/herself in the moment, they can then remain honest and present for the next moment. In the classroom, if the student doesn't allow him/herself to make mistakes then they can't grow. The learning process begins with forgiving yourself. To experience a failure is not a problem; in fact it is a gift. It is the seed and the measurable potential for growth. Dwelling on that failure is the inhibitor. I teach my students to acknowledge that failure and to immediately forgive themselves for it, so that they can return to the present where learning is happening.

Throughout our lives and in most of our primary education we are trained to find the right answer to every problem. While this method of thinking is extremely useful in most fields, it can be paralyzing to an artist. To train as an artist, this paradigm must be shifted. In order to find freedom and growth in the artistic process we cultivate choices instead of seeking answers. To create a character, for example, the actor makes a choice, tries it on, and plays with it for a while. If the choice isn't working, he throws it away and tries something else. It's not a failure... it's the process. If the artist is aiming for the perfect choice they will sabotage themselves in an effort to avoid mistakes. Students must be allowed to try, and fail, and try again, and through this experience their failures will be celebrated as successes. If they are not celebrated then they are seen as steps backwards, when they are in fact just the opposite.

In order to create a community of learners that are eager to participate and willing to fail in order to succeed, it is essential that I be willing to participate and to fail as well. I am just as much a member of the community of learners as are my students. The classroom must be experienced, not witnessed and as such, most of my class happens up on your feet. Consequently, whenever we are doing an exercise, a warm-up, or a group activity, I join in and participate right along with them. If we're doing an exercise where we stand in a circle, I'm right in the circle with them, jumping in and taking risks, giving them permission to do the same. If we're discussing nervousness in performance, I will make sure to tell them about the things I get nervous about when performing, or even the specific things that are making me nervous right then teaching in front of the class. Permission to fail begins with me. If my students can see me fail, and then forgive myself and return to the present, then they can begin to do the same.