

Geoffrey Arndt's Teaching Philosophy

The first lesson I ever learned as an artist was to ask, "what story are we telling?" This came from my childhood teacher and first audience member, my mother. She was a special education teacher, carpenter, seamstress, tarot card reader, and arts advocate. Essential to her question were the lessons to question the story we are telling and embrace that performance is a conversation between artist and audience. Lessons followed that once we have begun to explore the "what," we would figure out the "how" of telling that story. So, if that meant that we climbed on the furniture, put on a dress and embellished our hair with a well-worn shirt, or hung upside down and told the story with the shadows on the ceiling, that spark of playful curiosity has stayed with me. I have carried that spark into the classroom and rehearsal spaces in which I work.

Creating a Caring, Curious, and Empowering Environment

I begin each course through engaging the class in a shared experience; one example is that I give each student an object, piece of fabric, or an image and ask the question, "how can we use this inspiration in front of us to create a performance?" I invite the students to find a partner and switch objects and do the exercise again with their partner's object. Then, the partners share their ideas with each other, and we open it to a large discussion about the objects and our theoretical performances. After this shared experience, we are primed to create community guidelines for our work in the classroom. I invite the students to imagine a strong triangle; at the top point is "self" and at the other points are "others" and "our space." Then, we brainstorm strategies so we can actively be aware and check-in with each of these areas daily and establish boundaries, how we can demonstrate care for each of these areas, and how we might repair these areas if a boundary is crossed. After we create our community guidelines, we move on to goals and artistic questions. I encourage students to articulate in writing and/or verbally what their learning goals are, as I will share mine in the syllabus and in conversation. Goals are introduced as a personal part of their journey, rather than as the end of a process. Emphasis is placed on creating pathways by exploring the possible connections and support systems in their world.

Methods and Structure in the Classroom

I believe in cross-training, so I employ concepts of multiple artists in my teaching of performance, directing, and devising. I work from an embodied cognition model where I introduce a tool or technique, we explore and experiment physically, then we apply the tool or technique to actual scenarios in production and scholarship. To embody new knowledge and develop artistic skills, I specialize in Theatre of the Oppressed and Michael Chekhov training tools. By exploring Boal's Forum Theatre and his "games for actors and non-actors," we explore the relationship between audience and performer and the power dynamics involved in storytelling models. Boal believed that the audience needed to be motivated to action and that theatre had the ability to raise the audience to a

*"I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive."
Joseph Campbell*

cause. In using Chekhov tools, I teach to a student's creative individuality by providing Chekhov's text analysis, troubleshooting techniques for character creation and connection, as well as generative devising. For example, I would introduce the Archetypal Gestures, like Push and Pull, and invite the artists to embody these gestures in their full body, followed by brief reflection of how these gestures can be used to understand character motivations and the arc of their character. Then, we would improvise short scenes using this tool to deepen the full body knowledge. Then, we would apply these tools to a text or current project. These techniques train students to better connect their character's inner self with their outer actor expression.

Student Choice and Creative Individuality

In choosing material to explore, I have learned that providing options for students gives them ownership over their lived experience. So, instead of choosing a set of texts for the class, I will invite students to question what story they are interested in telling then provide them texts that can guide them toward transformation. This means that students are not limited in roles that they might "fit" when working in my classroom. Chekhov's work is about total transformation into the character by way of the imagination, and Boal's theories center on the transformation of the audience by way of empowerment. Self-reflection, as well as group flyback sessions lead to discussions of how we make artistic choices and where we can take those choices further. I measure student success is in logging their process to employ methods that fit them and make their work have a sense of ease, wholeness, form, and beauty. A clear connection between Boal and Chekhov is their insistence on teaching people for the benefit of the future. This overarching goal helps refine my process and grounds me when I am looking for ways to improve my teaching.

Whether my students become life-long artists or patrons of the arts, they know the power inherent in the arts to change the world for the better as they have been changed by the arts. Storytelling is in our DNA, and for some, it is buried as deep as the memories of childhood. As an artistic mentor, I seek to unlock those memories, that hidden DNA, and bring it to the surface to enliven the artist to tell their stories and awaken their communities.