

# Tech Thoughts on Teaching & Learning

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from *Considering Pictures*

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Here's a question we keep coming back to: how do we balance skill-learning and skill-teaching within the multifaceted conversation about ideas, history, and practice that makes up art education?

If you're studying photography, design, new media, or art in any of a dozen guises, this question is at the core of what you're doing — whether you explicitly ask it or not (because the folks who run your course have asked and answered it for you).

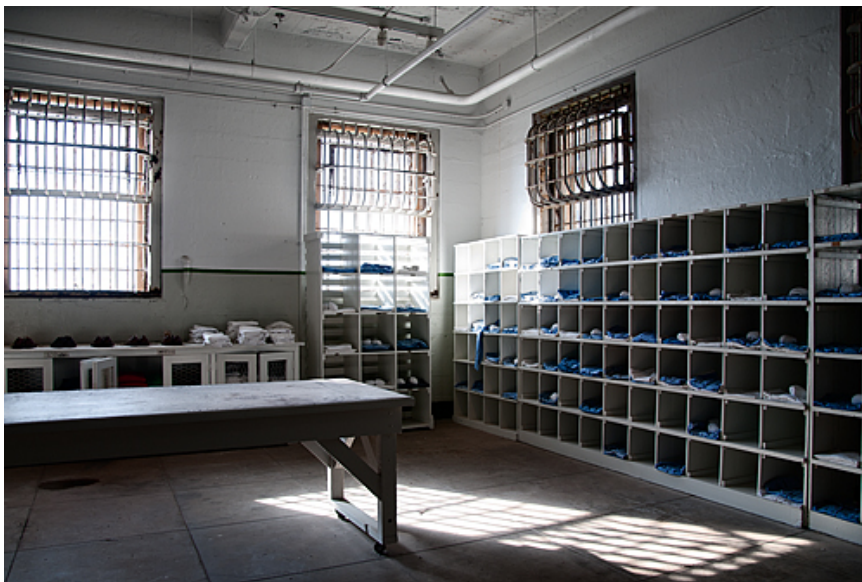
And if you're teaching photography, design, etc., it's even more critical — because your answer affects, *de facto*, the lives of everyone who studies with you.

There are several ways to divide this up, and many different rationales for arguing this side or that side, but the equation basically comes down to two options: either skill is more important than history and theory, or vice versa. And perhaps a third option — oops, almost forgot — skill, history, and theory might be equally important.

That seems simple, but in actual fact, on the ground, in the trenches, on the street, in *practice* — there are many (many!) different recipes. However, in my experience teaching (and learning) in several contexts (high schools, colleges, community colleges, graduate schools, museum education and continuing education programs), the weight of the teeter-totter comes down, almost all the time, on theory. That is, generally, most programs in art — at any level beyond the most basic summer camp craft table, or recreational art center — put the weight and the emphasis on the *why* over the *how*.

Flatly put, though, this seems absurd — don't you have to first *make* a picture before you can talk about why you made it?

There's not much outright argument on this point. But if you listen closely, or read between the lines of the program mission statement, you'll often find that introductory courses deal solely with the mechanics of technique and tools, while upper level courses talk primarily to theory and criticality — and that there's not much overlap between the two.



*Abandoned* © 2011 Yarimar Jiménez

Moreover, once you get into the courses themselves, you might find a weird disconnect in the day-to-day classroom action; that is, the skills teacher might not seem to have read anything more taxing or more relevant than the daily newspaper, while the history and theory teacher might appear to not know how to plug in a hard disk or convert a file.

How can this be true? And is it true?

Yes, it's true.

Art education is in crisis, in more ways than the obvious news-of-the-day, budget-ax-again, headlines. In fact, because of its insidious and foundation-undermining logic, this problem might be the more serious issue facing art educators and art students. That's because art and art-making requires a whole person — mind and body, body-in-mind — a contextually embedded, relationally rooted, experientially active human being, but the way we most often learn and teach art is split and processed into two apparently opposing camps.

The issue started rolling back in Plato's day, if not earlier (as did much of anything regarding education in the West), and accelerated all down the line — from Descartes and his famous mind/body dualism, sweeping up Kant's rationalism, surging with the post-Enlightenment waves of Romanticism, Modernism, and so on — right to our present day, drenching us with a conundrum: do art or talk about it (but not both, at least, not in the classroom).



*Crowd Inspiration*  
© 2011 Kristen Dorata

Obviously, I wholly reject this split. Making art helps me talk about it; talking about art helps me make it. The process is essential in its entirety — because it *is* an entirety — and from whichever direction we emerge into it. To teach and learn how to be artists we need to read, make, talk, make, think, make...and do it all again.

A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. John Dewey, *Art and Experience*

And, by extension, teaching and making art, no matter how new the tools or how current the motivations, is not actually teaching, and not actually learning, unless and until the process takes root, and lives, in someone's individualized experience — that is, a whole, embedded, contextualized, experience of process.

One reason I keep writing about this is because it's on my mind all the time, not only because I'm doing a dissertation on new media art education at Teachers College, but also, perhaps primarily, because I'm puzzling through these dichotomies while working, wherever I'm teaching and whatever the specific subject.

Another reason is because I've just finished an amazing term with the General Studies students at ICP. Our class was called Technical Seminar, and the catalog dictated a diet of

Photoshop tools and workflow (which we hit hard and often, over and over again), but the most invigorating conversations came from the intersection of technique and thinking, from the how and the why of the pictures themselves.

This is why I teach photography: to arrive at the lab and find you already there, printing, color correcting, retouching, with focused intent and purpose — and when I come in you stop and ask if the thought is more clear with a masked sky or an unmasked sky, with a slight blur here, or with a sharper detail there.

And as we click through the layer structure, playing the subtleties against each other, we talk about the previous pictures you've made, and pictures you want to make, and about pictures you've seen at galleries, in books, and on websites, and about pictures you will see, or essays you will read, in the future, because of a recommendation from a friend, fellow student, or from me, or another teacher.

None of this is an accident; none of it just happens. We build our history together, whether we set out do so or not, because it's in this conversation that looking and thinking and making inform each other and become real.

And then, in the next print we see the movement of the idea, or the shape of a new concept, because you've nudged the ink brighter, or darker, or more contrasty. Which leads to the next print, and the one following. And then, a week later, with new pictures now on the monitor and on paper, the conversation picks up again, continues, and we see our tracks stretch out behind us and into the future, because we're making that future together, in the collective practice of our individual art.

These have been good days. When I see the evolution of your process, when I see your intent begin to merge with your technique, your thinking with your tools — this is human. This is making a life in pictures.

And, frankly, these are rare days. Too often these exchanges don't happen, or don't happen robustly, because they're smothered in the details of short-sighted course descriptions and narrow curriculums. And because, as part-time itinerant teachers, unfortunately, many of us don't have much weight to throw against the system.



*Basta la cara* © 2011 Doyeon Kim

But here's my plea, for all of us, teachers and students: let's focus on opening it up. Let's get the details, the nitty-gritty, but not at the expense of the broad sweep and balance of the entire process, both the how and the why. Let's make pictures, videos, and network installations, and write code, poetry, and code-poetry — let's learn the tools and the grammar — but let's not sacrifice the history and the context.

And, mostly, let's stop pretending that any of us work as isolated automatons, as if we live in an atomized world where idea is separate from material. We don't breathe that way. We don't learn that way. We can't teach that way.



*Calvary: Silence & Noise* © 2011 Laura Macrini

Here's a thought: technology teachers, let's do reading lists, and ask for writing responses; and theory teachers, let's do physical philosophy, and ask for artifacts in response.

And students — keep us honest. We're learning more from you than you probably realize.

*The pictures illustrating this essay are from students in the General Studies Digital Tech Seminar, Winter 2011, at ICP. Thanks for a great term, and thanks for letting me post your work on this blog.*