

Teaching Statement  
Susan Briana Livingston

"Ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own." -- *Nikos Kazantzakis*

Teachers are in the unique position to reflect their aspirations for the betterment of society through their pedagogy. I envision arts education at all levels and in all forms as a powerful combination of history, contemporary life, and critical engagement with cultural productions through intertextual palimpsest and deep connections to both theory and material experience. In order to be most effective, arts education needs to address both historical and contemporary visual culture. This should include a holistic approach to theory that combines the traditional approach to art history reflected through, for example, Irwin Panofsky's iconographic studies, T.J. Clark's Marxist art history, Stuart Hall's neo-Marxist critique to critical theory from theorist from Foucault, Derrida to Butler and Spivak. Intertextuality, considering images from Picasso to Pokémon and Hogarth to Hitchcock, demonstrates both broad cultural trends, as well as idiosyncratic moments and is key to critical thinking.

I provide my students with the skills to employ transdisciplinary webs to examine shifting ideas about beauty, a subject I deal with quite closely in my own work. We connect diverse issues and topics from Ruben's ideal of beauty to Ron English's discussion of the postmodern appropriation of media icons and beauty in visual culture. Through these practices, art is most importantly a critical thinking practice centered on, and accomplished through, studying and creating visual productions. Whether I am teaching gender studies or art education, my students make art as a critical activity. Poetry, reflective "selfies", empowering "memes", and culture jamming toys are all pedagogic tools that encourage multiple intelligences to flourish and offers my students a non-traditional way to approach critical thinking and theoretical material. When teaching art making, I begin with basic skills acquisition, but quickly ask my students to take those skills and apply them to larger projects and bigger ideas, all with an emphasis on the student achieving what they want out of the class.

Personally, I believe the role of an educator is to facilitate a student-centric model of education whereby one teaches skills such as critical and sympathetic thinking that will enable students to pursue interests that enrich their own lives and their communities. Teaching in this fashion is democratic, diverse, and caters to multiple intelligences and learning styles through an array of both scholarly and hands on activities, multimodal presentations of information, interdisciplinary materials, and collaborative projects and discussions. My goal, as the Kazantzakis quote eloquently explains, is to help my students progress, and in the end, I "joyfully collapse", or pull back, having imparted to them the knowledge and tools they need to continue on towards their own goals without my explicit aid.

My classroom is a laboratory, a place to investigate, to develop, and to try on and try out new modes of thinking and making. This model provides a place where students feel safe to fail, to jump without knowing where they will land, and to wander off course over new ground. It is a research environment that does not focus on homogenized end goals but on the learning that happens during the process of exploration. The laboratory model creates the most important feature of any classroom, productive engagement. Encouraging the pursuit of students' own aims and passions creates engagement in the material and an overall interest in education and learning that I believe no other models can match.

The most important element of a classroom environment is the students themselves. The ideal student is interested in knowledge, is receptive to new ideas and approaches, and is tolerant of differing opinions. However, few individuals come to the classroom already equipped with these attributes and the skills necessary to fully engage with and absorb the material. Becoming a student is an educational process in and of itself, and the teacher must model this process in the classroom, not by commandment but by personal example. As a teacher, I am driven by my firm belief in the transformative power of art, visual culture and critically engaged education. Through praxis, I demonstrate not only how to be a good student, but how to be an effective researcher and passionate art educator. In the future, my teaching will not only continue to follow my beliefs on the power of art as an essential tool in critical thinking, but will continue to adapt and grow with my students needs and the aims of the course content.