

# Kristin Carlson Becker TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Foundations should be an introduction to the possibilities that visual art has to offer, and to the core principles that students need for more sophisticated study and specialization. Based on my recent teaching experience, and on my experience as an art student at several different schools, I believe that variety is crucial to a powerful foundations curriculum. As a foundations teacher I use numerous strategies to introduce concepts, teach techniques, and promote independent thinking. I seek to inspire students using all possibilities, including hands-on demonstrations, thought-provoking assignments, critiques, discussions, readings, field trips, student presentations, visiting artist talks, and class and community collaborations. Students who learn through variety have many more opportunities to comprehend artistic principles in action, and therefore more opportunities to discover the methods that work best for their individual vision.

In drawing and 2D design classes, I introduce students to a variety of materials and ways of working. Students experiment and practice with many mark-making tools and surfaces, including graphite, charcoal, markers, ink, paint, black and white and colored paper for collage, board, plywood, and found objects such as old books and magazines. At times, students make their own drawing tools by dipping objects in ink or creating their own colored or textured paper for collage. If possible, I use some assignments to introduce more advanced tools and formats, such as computer software for design and photography, printmaking equipment, or artist's books and typography. This enforces that core art concepts are true across media, and it also introduces students to possibilities for future coursework. Similarly, I emphasize working from different types of inspiration: drawing and studying color from life, collecting natural specimens, studying the compositions of other artists, taking photographs, and keeping a journal of ideas and images are all important artistic practices to teach in foundations.

Introduction of new media and methods should be paired with thought-provoking assignments that challenge and inspire students. At advanced levels, students will work more independently, which means they will design their own assignments, so early on it is important to teach the value of limitation, practice, playful exploration, and personal sources of inspiration. In foundations, I use short and long-term assigned projects to demonstrate these ideas, as well as to encourage design and drawing ability through repetition and trial and error.

Overall, I feel that brainstorming—what some call the ideation process—is one of the most important and challenging things to teach, so all of my longer-term projects deal with this in some way. Over the last three years I have engaged in scholarly research regarding the dual verbal and visual aspects of mark-making, collecting ideas from teachers who successfully combine writing and drawing techniques for ideation purposes. Written stream-of-consciousness, cataloguing, and mapping activities often provide vivid access to other aspects of a student's life, and these can be powerful catalysts for art projects. At the same time, associating the freedom and messiness of drawing and doodling with the writing process is also beneficial, encouraging students to thoroughly play and sketch before committing to a final idea. Encouraging writing as part of the image-making process—and vice versa—makes students better thinkers and makers, so I use many of the methods I have discovered in my research in the foundations classroom, preparing students to take more ownership of their creative process at more advanced levels.

Building critique skills through verbal and visual activities is also important in foundations. I want my students to learn strong analysis skills, as well as to give and receive

constructive criticism. Students build visual analysis skills over the course of the semester by responding to artwork using both critical and creative writing, through researched and planned presentations, and through free discussion. I structure critiques differently depending on the day: Sometimes students take notes and answer questions before talking, sometimes gut reactions are requested while the maker of the piece stays silent. This demonstrates that the entry point into discussion can affect the outcome. Readings by artists and critics also provide insight into the analysis process. Approaching art critiques through many methods gives all students a chance to communicate in ways that are both more and less comfortable for them. This in turn strengthens communication and analysis skills overall and gives each student an opportunity to re-examine his or her perceptions of the art-making process. Likewise, it enhances intellectual and personal growth by asking students to discuss diverse perceptions in an open-minded classroom setting.

Last but not least, an important part of my role as a teacher is to evaluate my students objectively, based on the expectations I have set for the class. Foundations offers a challenge, since some students are planning to be majors, while others are taking the course as an elective. I provide clear grading objectives for each assignment so students know at the outset how they will be evaluated. Depending on the extent of the project, I grade according to the fulfillment of specific objectives, as well as on craft, creative concept development, and improvement. Portfolio and journal reviews provide an overview of how the student has progressed over the semester, and I also carefully track student participation. I make every effort to be detailed, objective and methodical in my grading, and I seek to communicate through constructive comments in addition to the letter grades required by most institutions.

The beauty of a studio classroom—and an art building overall—is the opportunity it provides for multiple teaching and working methods. As a foundations teacher, I am responsible for instigating and introducing artistic discovery that can apply to all future study, as well as for suggesting the potential of cross-pollination among media. The importance of providing a strong foundation for artistic practice, as well as the relevance this practice can have in other academic subjects—and in life beyond school—drives me to excel in my work, and to seek constant opportunities for improvement that will benefit my students and my fellow teachers.