

Will Daddario, PhD
Teaching Philosophy

You understand who you are.
You understand who you could be.
You understand the gap between the two.
Sometimes, you close the gap.
You become who you might be.
You experience this for a moment.
What if we call that moment: “the classroom”?
—From Goat Island’s, “Letter to a young practitioner”¹

In this quotation, members of the former Chicago-based performance group Goat Island transpose “the classroom” from a location to a generative duration through which future and present meet. In this classroom, the student, or young practitioner, must transform herself from passive recipient of knowledge to active producer of meaning. As a teacher, I aim to facilitate the encounter between students and who they might be.

To do this, I distinguish between *teaching* and *teaching something*. The former, for me, calls for a committed engagement with ethics and critical thinking, which, in the present moment, means devising tactics to deconstruct 1.) the explicit and institutionalized exclusionary practices that continue to subordinate people of color beneath white ideals, or, if you like, minoritarian positions beneath the hegemonic status quo, and 2.) the capitalist fervor for consumption that would like to transform university education from a training ground for creative thinkers into a preparatory academy for the inexorable world of work. Teaching *something*, by distinction—and in my case this is usually teaching dramatic literature, critical theory, and performance studies—means guiding students through well-traversed and adeptly mapped fields of disciplinary-specific knowledge in order to introduce the vocabularies and methodological know-how that will enable students to join the conversations going on in those fields.

Preserving the distinction between teaching and teaching something helps me to remember that all encounters with the past, either through text, image, or repertoire, produce affects in the present. Students should never simply memorize names, dates, and facts, but, instead, search adamantly for connections between historical events and the world in which they live. I argue that finding these connections will strengthen students’ abilities to think historically about themselves, which, in turn, will expose the structures undergirding “business as usual” (and “school as usual”) in the present and then lead, perhaps, to the dismantling of those structures.

Once dismantled, then the fun of construction begins. In the creative act of knowledge production, I seek not to assert my beliefs about specific texts and ideas but, instead, to guide students to the site of critical encounter. Toward this aim, I draw from instructions offered by native pedagogical practice. Malcolm Margolin, writing about the insights of a Yurok political and cultural leader, gives me a particular idea to think about. He reminds me that teaching is not

¹ Goat Island, “Letter to a Young Practitioner.” *Theatre in Crisis? Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, eds. Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 246.

“just a means of conveying knowledge and information; it is an integral part of that knowledge and information as well.”² In other words, as a teacher I must always remain cognizant of the fact that, in the best-case scenario, students will remember *what* I teach and also *that I was the one who taught them*. I am insinuating myself into students’ lives through the material I choose to teach and the ways in which I present the material to them. I cannot take this act lightly.

I balance this contemplative and measured stance with the fiery, activist messages of Cornel West and the dynamic and progressive thinkers whom he likes to channel. Speaking about pedagogy in a 2015 interview with philosopher George Yancy, West declared the following: “It’s about praxis and what kind of life you live, what kind of costs you’re willing to bear, what kind of price you’re willing to pay, what kind of death you’re willing to embrace.”³ These words build from earlier statements about the current thaw that West senses, a thaw that transitions from the frozen ethical wasteland of 1980s Reaganomics and 1990s neoliberal Clinton policies to the fire of contemporary protest cultures unable any longer to stomach the oppression of the poor and the dispossessed peoples of the United States. Teachers in the West school of thought—including bell hooks, Frederick Douglass, John Coltrane, Suzan Lori-Parks—modulate between pedagogy and psychagogy where the latter term connotes a guiding of the soul instead of an endowment of new capabilities and skills. To guide students’ souls, a teacher must openly name his inner-contradictions and beliefs. I, for example, am a heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian-raised (though currently unaffiliated) white male. Building pedagogical certainties out of cultural traditions to which I cannot lay claim requires tireless work. It, in fact, requires that I give up my certainties of self, all pretension of ownership or mastery, that I acknowledge the privileges from which I have willingly benefitted, and humbly accept criticism when egotism leads me astray. Making these admissions in the classroom, while encouraging students to join me in the quest for knowledge, has led to many meaningful experiences where, together, students and I have guided our souls and minds to new understandings.

This self-reflexive teaching philosophy has provided me with a repertoire of skills that help to open students’ eyes to the promise of “the classroom,” as described by Goat Island. I consider myself first and foremost a teacher committed to enlivening the imaginations of students and sharpening the analytical abilities of citizens whose burden it will be to create the next generation of thoughtful art (i.e., art that *is* thinking). Next, I consider myself a teacher of dramatic literature, performance studies, and performance philosophy, each a concrete and evolving academic discipline concerned with the ways in which theatre, drama, and performance contribute to the production of knowledge and challenge the status quo. I am seeking a working environment that will nurture my abilities, inspire new approaches to teaching, and help me expand my mind so that I might continually stoke the flames of the fire within.

² Malcolm Margolin, “Indian Pedagogy: A Look at Traditional California Indian Teaching Techniques,” *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World*, eds. Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005) 74.

³ George Yancy and Cornel West, “Cornel West: The Fire of a New Generation,” “The Stone,” *New York Times* 19 August 2015 <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/cornel-west-the-fire-of-a-new-generation/?_r=0>