

Teaching Philosophy - Chris Staley – 2016

The first time I applied to graduate school I was rejected to all the schools I applied to. I was devastated. In many ways what I learned from this difficult experience inspired me to want to help my own students become the best artists and teachers they can be.

Several months after being rejected I was back in school as a special student working with a skilled teacher. I will never forget when he asked me about some ceramic covered jars I had just made. He asked, "What are you trying to say with these pots?" No teacher had ever asked me this question before. I have been basically asking my students and myself a similar question ever since "What are you trying to say with your art?"

I have increasingly come to appreciate that asking questions is often more important than answering them. In our attempts to consider or answer compelling questions, we are pushed to uncover and understand the lives we live. And inversely to consider how do the things we create influence the way we live? In a similar way to responding to art, questions invite us to attempt to understand our own lives and the broader unknown. Ultimately art is asking questions about the world we live in.

In responding to the educational challenge of teaching college students to create ceramic art that is uniquely their own, clay becomes a vehicle for students to ask large questions. These queries examine social, cultural, and personal perspectives that ultimately influence the insights a young ceramic artist uses to express thoughts and feelings about the world he/she lives in.

The poet Robert Frost made the insightful comment "no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." I often adapt this saying to "no surprise for the teacher, no surprise for the students." Students have told me that enthusiasm to learn is what they value most in their teachers. After 35 years of teaching, I can honestly say I begin each semester with a sense of wonder and anticipation of the discoveries to be made by myself, and my students.

As a teacher I am continually striving to discover more effective ways to teach. By sharing my own doubts and fears I try and convey to students that failing is a fundamental component to creativity and learning. I often tell students that we are in this educational journey together. I want them to know that I am learning from them and I value their wisdom. I try to be a good listener.

At the end of the day I love to teach because I love to learn. Whether it's asking students to do 40 drawings in 40 minutes or asking them to write a 3-page autobiography these assignments are creative opportunities to learn something transformative about themselves. I do these assignments too, showing them that I am an active participant in the learning process.

In my efforts to create a dynamic inclusive learning environment I hope to empower students to be leaders and thinkers in their own right.