

Statement of Teaching Philosophy – Marla Burkholder

My philosophy of teaching is rooted in my experience as a theater artist. I believe that the art of theater lies in capturing the essence of being human. Therefore, teaching the art of theater is about helping students discover the depths of their own unique selves, and encouraging them to open themselves to the vast breadth of experience of others. The micro and macro human experience is full of both drama and comedy – loss/shame/cruelty/despair and joy/laughter/serendipity/connection. Helping students navigate these human realms with a sense of wonder is at the heart of my teaching.

My teaching philosophy is also balanced by a very practical view of what it means to be an artist in the 21st century. I bring my experience as a working actor, dialect coach, teaching artist, theater producer, and artistic director to the classroom. I believe that art is made through inspired hard work and collaboration. I encourage my students to nurture their creativity and curiosity while rigorously attending to the detailed work of building practical performance and production skills.

I begin almost any course I teach with some version of a role-playing exercise that allows students to have a snapshot experience of playing the archetypes of hero, bully, guide, mediator, and victim. The game encourages students to see their own personalities as fluid, shaped by the people and circumstances around them. And also to see human interactions in terms of role play, each individual fulfilling a role in a given moment to achieve an objective. This is an immediate and immersive way to connect with the very basic idea of acting – taking on the actions and perspective of someone else and bringing it to life on the stage.

I also structure the beginning of each course to focus on collaboration within the classroom. I often assign a simple performance in the first several days of a class, both as a means to assess what skills and interests the students bring to the class, and to set a pattern for how to offer peer-to-peer critique. In a dialects course, for example, I will ask each student to prepare a short monologue or poem in their “own dialect.” After each performance, I have a conversation with the student that focuses on how the student feels about their own voice, what they notice when they speak in front of a class of peers, and what they consider to be their particular voice and speech challenges. I then encourage the class to offer feedback in two stages. First, we speak about what worked – moments that felt connected and engaging, difficult enunciation handled skillfully, or ways the performer brought something unique to the piece. Second, we ask questions and offer observations about what did not work as well – words or phrases we couldn’t hear, an unfamiliar regional pronunciation, vocal patterns that may be unconscious. Throughout, the student performer is engaged in the discussion and encouraged to ask questions in return and offer responses to the critique.

I believe teaching collaboration also means insisting on an atmosphere of respect in and out of the classroom. I build my courses on the assumption that there is a broad range of human expression and working together means working through and with difference. My speech pedagogy is based in the work of Catherine Fitzmaurice and Dudley Knight, two master teachers who spent their careers opening the field of voice and speech to embrace the diversity of expressive potential in the human voice, as opposed to decades of traditional performer training that insisted on one prescribed way of speaking on the stage. In the theater appreciation courses I teach, I assign group projects with intentional mixing of students from a variety of backgrounds. Their common goal is to create a complete concept for a theater production, but they must rely on each other’s skills and strengths to construct a unified project.

I believe that assessment is crucial for motivating excellence in student work, but that assessing creative endeavors can be problematic. Artistic growth is both very individual, and not easily quantifiable. I stress the difference in my classroom between evaluating the level of work that has been invested in any given assignment, and judging an individual's creative talent. In creating evaluations for theater outreach programs I have managed, I use rubrics that assess individual growth in a number of qualitative categories, but set goals for quantitative success based only on composite results. This allows the teaching artists to focus on the overall growth of the group, not on requiring specific one-size outcomes from individual participants.

As a teacher, I believe I have much to learn from my colleagues and from others who have taught before me. I participate as often as possible in peer discussions on classroom management or group planning sessions with other teachers who are teaching the same class or subject. I often elicit advice from fellow teachers on preferred ways to lead common theater exercises, looking for new perspectives on assignments or concepts that I have taught for a long time. At least once a year I try to sit in on another teacher's class to observe and learn from a different approach to similar work.

Finally, I believe in the power of laughter and the importance of bringing a spirit of play into my classroom. I believe that when we laugh together, we open ourselves up and are able to receive more from one another. I try to bring a sense of humor to any subject, encouraging students to enjoy the absurdities of human circumstances, invention, and behavior. This means modelling personal humility as much as possible – laughing at my own shortcomings as a teacher – and fostering a supportive atmosphere of artistic risk-taking and mutual enjoyment of our common experience.