

Guidelines for Teaching Artists

from Eric Booth

Here are some suggestions about planning and practice for Teaching Artists to consider—mostly these are ideas good educators already know. This collection derives from asking myself the question, “What advice would I want to give to a new Teaching Artist in any artistic discipline?” Please note that these are my personal ideas; however, I have found them to be pertinent to the practice within many different kinds of arts-in-education programs. Some may seem obvious, some may seem difficult—they are all worth your consideration in the long-term process of developing your skills in the “In-Between Artistic Discipline” of being an artist who works in education.

Know the students.

Have a sense of what they are able to do at the grade level (or particular group level) you are teaching, what is interesting to them, what kinds of challenges will catch their attention. [Before you begin, you need to spend some time visiting a class at that grade level; talk to students of that age to get a feel for them; talk with the teacher about the students capacities.]

Engagement before information.

Not everyone agrees with me about this, but I place engaging students, getting them to participate actively in your work, as a higher priority than the actual information you exchange. This prioritization respects students as people, reminding us that they have to be involved in the work you present rather than merely acquiescent recipients of your information. And after they are engaged, your information will have a far greater impact and relevance, will be desired, retained and used.

Plan thoroughly.

It is wise to overplan a little, and to have blocks of material, to enhance your flexibility during the class—so that you can use or skip over blocks, and have plenty to choose from as the experience unfolds. Also, be prepared to ditch parts of your plan and improvise within the subject area in response to exciting things that happen in class. But do not count on improvising, plan extensively, no matter what. Our busy lives can lead us to justify the occasional underplanned lesson; and might not suffer on occasion. However, the planning determines the quality of the work, without planning the learning will be less good, your satisfaction will be less full.

Don't forget fun.

This is not fun just for its own sake, but fun as an integral part of the activities you present to the students. By endorsing fun as a design-component of your work, I am urging you to devise activities that students will jump into because of the appealing nature of the challenge. Play is an essential aspect of artistic experience; make sure to include serious play as a central part of your work.

Clear instructions.

I cannot overemphasize how much you will help yourself if you carefully prepare the instructions you will give—get them down to the absolute lucid minimum. Any ambiguity or vagueness will detract from the students' full involvement. I even suggest that you write out your instructions and practice them aloud, polish them till they are just right. Many an innocent friend is called to listen to instructions and give feedback on their clarity.

Setting the work environment.

Students take their clues from you. You need to engage their interests and set a working tone that builds up their courage and confidence to try new things. They need to feel safe enough to be sure they will not be embarrassed or look stupid, and they must be respected for the many competences they have. The way you relate to them, along with the overt classroom management practices you use, indicate to them how you want them to work with you.

Turn the responsibility for the learning over to the learner.

The deepest learning is accomplished as the student grapples with new information/ideas/challenges and finds satisfying solutions through her own endeavors. Of course, your guidance, feedback and information are part of the process, but try to create opportunities for the students to do their own learning as often as possible. Often the best Teaching Artist practice is just setting a good challenge and then staying out of the way as students learn through it.

Practice the activities you propose.

I hold it as a rule for myself that I always do the activity I am going to ask students to do. This enables me to get a sharp sense of the kinds of experiences and challenges they will have in my exercise, and it enables me to sharpen the instructions for the activity. It also helps me to lead a much better reflection with students about the activity because I have personal experience to speak from.

Step by step.

In designing activities, make sure that you set challenges that start at an interesting but accomplishable level, and then offer further steps within which students can succeed at each stage. Each step must be slightly more challenging than the last, or they lose interest. You will be able to guide students into surprisingly complex work, if you build in steps that enable them to build on their competences, and enjoy the progressively more difficult steps.

Don't forget reflection.

This part of activities is the most frequently overlooked, the most often jettisoned when time gets short. However, adding opportunities for students to get a grip on what they have just experienced, including a variety of ways for them to perceive what they have just accomplished, to notice the processes that have just happened, is essential to a rich learning experience. Teaching Artists often use discussions and journal writing to engage students in reflection; however, there are many ways to reflect, many of them are so active and lively that they become activities in themselves.

Five topics to always be on the lookout for reinforcing.

These are essential ideas that the arts can introduce into the classroom, and cannot be overemphasized. Bring them up often, let them become thinking habits of yours in working with the students, and in the students' work. These are powerful bonuses the arts can offer lifelong learning:

- Focus on process in balance with focus on product. (Notice processes wherever possible—how students did something, how an artist does something, how an event unfolded, etc.)
- Separate observation from interpretation. (We tend to blur these practices; try to maintain a clear, consistent pattern of noticing what is there before following the natural impulse to judge, interpret, like/dislike it.)
- Emphasize their accomplishments. (Even if they have completed a challenge that seems simple, note the things they had to do, the problems they solved, and the authentic musical value of these actions. Find the valuable kernel in student comments, even for comments that seem odd at first.)
- Making choices, and noting their impact. (This focus on choices can reduce the harshness of judgmental critiques (e.g. "what choices did Michael make in his clapping pattern?"); it creates a level inquiry field for looking at any art work; e.g. you can look at the choices a student made in a classroom musical assignment, and at the related choices made by a famous musician.)
- The quality of questions. (The quality of your questions, those that are clever, subtle, perfect in some way, will make a major difference in the quality of the answering by the students. One great question can make a great class; and a great question is that which launches lively answering processes. Also, attend to the quality of student questions, push them toward asking the best possible questions, and always celebrate a great question from a student.)

Be who you are.

Your authenticity as an artist is one of your greatest strengths, don't feel you must hide your artistic enthusiasm, your personality, your abilities, or your personal passion behind a "teacher" mask.

Controlling the classroom.

This is a big topic; one that probably brings the most anxiety to new Teaching Artists. In my experience, problems with control are usually the result of weak structure in the lesson, with problems with what is being asked of the students, or with unclear expectations. In the early going, you will probably do well to put a few clear “control practices” in place, such as raising hands, a signal for silence, group focus. Set them simply and clearly, carefully articulate your expectations of the students, and adhere to them, with particular attention at the beginning; if they are reasonable and humane, the students will almost always buy into your rules. Be sure to enlist the classroom teacher as an ally and partner (and many will give you excellent specific suggestions if you ask). To make sure an activity is appropriate with students, do some homework—ask some young people, try it out with a young person if you are in doubt. The classroom may be a little more unfocused than you are comfortable with, or the level of chaos that erupts when you are working with students may be more than the teacher’s comfort permits—these are issues to be discussed between you and the teacher. An angry or disciplinarian approach to the students rarely works for more than a moment, and undermines your longer term relationship with the students.

Working with the classroom teacher.

When you enter a classroom, you enter that teacher’s domain, and you are a welcome guest. But you must be a guest who is sensitive to and respectful of the patterns and practices set up by that teacher. You may ask for help from teachers, and most will fully support you. There are some teachers who will not participate in the ways you would like; you may ask for specific things, but do not try to force the teacher to participate more fully. Always support the teacher in front of the students. Always try to engage the teacher to the maximum of her/his comfort level. Try to tap into other things that are happening in that classroom (this can be casual or more intentional), other subject matter being studied, things hanging on the wall, etc. You may try to gently draw the teacher into greater participation over time, but don’t push. If there is something you definitely need, ask directly.

Scaffolding.

Give students enough of a framework for the class to prevent their wondering why they are doing things, where it is going. Such natural concerns will constrain their participation. At the beginning of the class, and sometimes during it, let them know the general shape of the time together, and the “why” of activities. It can be very brief, and you need not divulge any secrets you have in store, but it helps them feel safe enough to invest themselves in the activities.

Use warm-up activities.

Because so much goes on in a student's day, they need a little adjustment to get minds and bodies ready to do good work with you. Your warmup may be brief or more involved; it may be easy or hard. But use those few minutes to get the group focused and eager, and to experientially introduce something central to the lesson that follows.

Connections to the curriculum.

This is a big and interesting topic, and different programs handle it in different ways. You should know that there are many ways to make authentic links between the artwork and the other kinds of work that occur in any classroom. The connections can be quite literal (dealing with the same subject matter), or they can be quite subtle (dealing with a metaphor that applies to both music and history, for example). Making such connections is valuable for the learning, and is most valuable when the students themselves are making the connections, rather than being fed them. Students spot very obvious connections quickly and are not particularly excited by them.

In a planning meeting with teachers.

Try to get every participating teacher to be present and to speak. Use an introductory question that everyone is to answer, perhaps. Make sure that everyone present has expressed support for any plans that involve everyone; if someone is laying low, ask directly. Set the meeting's agenda at the beginning, and confirm the conclusions and plans for what each must do, at the end.

Staying fresh.

Staying fresh in your work, keeping the same edge of excitement and enthusiasm, is not likely to become a problem for quite a while in your work. At the beginning it feels as if one is scrambling to keep up. However, it does arise for many hard-working Teaching Artists over time. You must love this work, and be actively in touch with your natural enthusiasm, when you are with students. Though the following may seem harsh or naive, the rule of thumb I use is this: being a Teaching Artist is always something more than just a money gig; if ever you find you are doing it only for the money, something is wrong.

A few odd tips:

Try to learn students names; it makes a real difference to them.

Arrive early so that you are settled, focused and ready.

Your enthusiasm is possibly your most important attribute, from planning meeting through final class—do not lose it. If you feel it getting squelched, refocus your expectations so that you can remain enthusiastic about aspects of the work.

Try to communicate with the teacher between classes, to see if plans are unfolding as expected, to find out other class events you might tap into, to make sure some conflict has not arisen.

Never promise things to the students that may not happen.

Giving homework assignments may or may not work—often it does not, because you are not an everyday visitor. If a project requires students to do something at home, plan it carefully with the teacher, have the teacher reinforce it and remind students.

Listen extremely carefully to what students say, and “mirror back” their answers when they contain a useful germ of insight that the student didn’t quite have the words to express clearly. When you do “mirror back,” be sure to be rigorously faithful to what the student did say, don’t embellish it.

Use yourself as a performer or demonstrator if possible; live performance has a powerful impact on students if used strategically. Also, try to devise activities in which you can perform the students’ musical work, this providing a stunning, but authentic, enhancement to their accomplishments.