

Teaching Statement –Paul Gordon

I believe in the illuminating powers of theater and dance, and wish to convey them to my students, not merely as a teacher, but as a co-learner. In this regard I hold in high esteem the pedagogical theories, writings and practices of Maxine Greene and Peter Hocking and, by extension, John Dewey. When making work, I frame questions and opinions within theatrical and movement-based creative pursuits; and I do my best to instill a curiosity and interest in the ways we say (or try to say) things. I always aim to offer ideas on how to examine and critique, but also encourage direct peer-to-peer discourse when possible and direct the discussion only when necessary.

I also believe in the power of thoughtful action, by which I mean an engagement with self-examination and reflexive investigation of intention. If one has never questioned one's own actions, there's a good chance one will not recognize deviations from a productive path.

Both my research and my personal experience have informed my attitudes and approaches toward teaching, which are reflected in a few essential tenets I try to uphold and impart in all of my classes and lectures:

- Lead by example
- Acknowledge and reinforce the value of learning through experimentation
- Embrace failure
- Emphasize the need for an understanding of intention behind action
- Validate the need to assess, contextualize and re-examine
- The attempt at thoughtful action is the result of and at the core of all solid learning.
- Ask stuff and question stuff
- Listen
- When possible, laugh.
- When appropriate, bring homemade cookies.

For me, when teaching physical work and public speaking work (under which, at some basic levels my disciplines fall) some of the greater challenges lie not in guiding the facile, trained dancer/actor for whom lessons come easy, but the less athletic, the physically challenged and the introverted – those who have not confronted their own physicality in a public forum too often (or have not had good experiences in doing so). Identifying with “the underdog” as I do, I prefer to lead by example, never insisting that anyone try something I wouldn't be willing to try as well. Because I teach techniques in collaboration as a means to strong group communication, I also strive to impart a collaborative atmosphere that emphasizes a process- rather than product-orientation. This is instrumental in building many varied physical and communication skills, as well as reinforcing a kernel of confidence in the minds of the class' “underdogs”; but it can make it difficult to assess the progress of certain students. I've found that I can come to understand where a student places him/herself within the work. When reviewing written and/or audio-video responses to questions about creative processes and thoughtful action, and discussion about videos, podcasts, essays, etcetera.

Dance and theater come with associated issues around many current important social engagement fronts – politics, social activism, gender orientation and discrimination, and the validity of the making art as a actual job, to name some. Having been a garbage man as well as a theater and dance artist, I have confronted certain stereotypes of dancing and dancers. I've encountered homophobia as well as issues concerning weight, size and strength (acceptability, as in who “should/could” be a dancer). Because of the nature of what exercises I teach, coupled with who I am and where I've come from, I've yet to run up against unwilling participants in at least one

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kind of physically challenging work I do. As a guest teacher at many universities, I've led workshops for students as well as open classes, and watched 80-year olds and 8-year olds working alongside their university-aged partners. The uncensored communication needed to find good ways "in" to the work often leads to unexpected minor epiphanies and new bonds and friendships along the way. I just try to get out of the way while remaining alert enough to jump in when required.

I know I am not alone in my knowledge that those students who remain uncommunicative are the hardest challenges. Learning comes not only from hands-on work but also from the observation of others doing the hands-on work; so I often encourage the active ones to step back and observe, and vice versa for those who tend to remain on the sidelines.

As far as feedback goes, I like to ask people to comment on what they see and what they think they are missing, and also like to use my personal experience as a springboard into deeper parts of a conversation. I do this to set an example that allows others to follow suit.

My recent interest takes the form of a set of rules and guides for the investigation of the creative process. I have outlined a series of frames for a curriculum that allows people to unlock certain aspects of their own creativity, no matter what shape it takes and limited only to how they see fit to implement it. Because I believe in the equality of the workplace – that no job is more important than any other – I view creativity as a tool that can help improve everyone's life and working life, and subsequently improve communities. To paraphrase Sir Ken Robinson stance on creativity, the contribution of knowledge gained through the study of and work in the arts has been all too often ignored as a catalyst for greatness in sciences, social sciences, politics, engineering and any other course of study at a place of learning – not to mention the benefits in daily home life and social outings.

In attempting to address the individual needs of students, I view my job as the teacher to be about continually inventing analogies and supplemental stories that allow people to approach the material from yet more angles. I want to offer each student enough ways in which to examine the work that he/she can ultimately find the one that unlocks whichever sticking points he/she has. Just as a Socratic dialogue can dig deep, so can a dialectic engagement with the tenets of my school for creative research, currently in development.

I also wish to consider the idea of Gifting as it pertains to my courses, the students, and the exchanges within the classroom setting. Just as I try to offer gifts during my shows, so do I view the many ways in which the idea of a gift comes into play in a teachable context. Students give me the gift of their time and effort, the school gives me the opportunities, and I in turn respond by finding as many ways as possible to impart those perspectives on gifting. I view this aspect of my practice as one of recontextualizing the daily exchanges between the community, my students and me.

There is much discussion these days as to the direct application of creative thought in the workplace and the extent to which creative training directly contributes to the flourishing of businesses and markets. While all things continue to flow and change, for now I know who I am, what I want to do, and why to do it; and I am confident that my approach to teaching, as well as the types of courses I have experience in offering, can be of service in direct and esoteric ways to students, no matter what their chosen career, and in their essential waking lives.