

Angela Franks Wells
Teaching Philosophy

Art is exploration, creation, and reflection. Teaching art is to provide the skill, knowledge, and courage needed to build meaningful experiences. Several years ago, I began questioning why I teach the way I do and the standard practices of the art classroom in general. I recognized a formula: teach technique, students make work with said technique, and then we have a group critique to evaluate the quality of the work made. This method has worked for decades, and the results are okay, but I wanted more. Artistic practice is much more complex than merely refining tool use. I began to strategically evolve my own teaching practice to go beyond tool use and integrate studio practices, collaborative making and learning, emphasizing that experimentation and failure are more beneficial than the final product, and developing exercises that enhance critical thinking, evaluation, and problem solving. I have integrated these aspects into each course I teach, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. I begin by creating a list of skills that I'd like students to have developed upon graduation and add skills that students often struggle with or are intimidated by (i.e. idea generation, public speaking, writing and speaking about art, confident problem solving fueled by tenacity, leading conversations about art or a reading, etc.). At the foundation of my renewed approach is this: play leads to imagination; imagination stimulates creativity; creativity develops ideas; and ideas foster innovation.

My courses are highly structured with daily or weekly assignments in addition to on-going tasks, demonstrations of technique; lectures relevant to course topics; discussion of readings, artists' work, and student research; and critical conversations about experimentations and production by the students. Within this structure, we play and make a lot. Utilizing a backwards design approach, I evaluate the course objectives and my list of desirable skills and construct activities that infuse play to achieve the objectives. I craft activities that require thinking and making outside of the box. These are low stakes grades and high stakes learning. This can include learning selection tools through a web-based scavenger hunt; in class shooting challenges that explore how we visualize emotions or using selected items/props to express a narrative or photographing and interviewing strangers on the street; experimenting with lighting to create mood and atmosphere (or show form and shape); and playing with how a process evolves through different types of images and on varying substrates. We develop tool use, encourage experimentation, and evaluate the information obtained and how to apply it in meaningful ways in our creative practice.

My classroom is a safe and inclusive environment where all ideas can flourish. I am dedicated to celebrating diverse life experiences, voices, and creative approaches. I take pride in my responsibility to introduce a wide array of artists, works, and philosophies that reflect the diversity of my students. We explore both contemporary and historical makers and thinkers, considering how our own work contributes to ongoing conversations. Recognizing that everyone learns differently, I ensure a variety of content and perspectives are shared by both me and the students. Alternative assessments are a crucial aspect of my teaching approach. I believe that learning extends beyond memorizing data. For example, a well-designed infographic can replace a traditional paper, and students are encouraged to ask questions about course readings and content rather than simply answering mine. Presentations on their semester goals and achievements can serve as an alternative to final projects, allowing students to self-evaluate, practice verbal communication, and synthesize their skills and knowledge. These activities create a space for students to identify what is meaningful to them and connect their interests outside the classroom to our course content.

I am deeply committed to providing meaningful learning experiences that extend beyond any singular course. We are teaching creative problem-solving and visual literacy, essential skills for successfully navigating life beyond the university.