EFFECTIVE TEACHING, HOLISTIC DESIGN

Part teacher and part designer, I am more than the sum of my parts. Whether I am in the classroom or a production meeting, my philosophy remains the same. Education takes place when there are positive expectations, good management, and subject mastery.

Having positive expectations simply means that the teacher believes in the student’s ability to learn. In 1986, the U. S. Department of Education conducted a study that concluded, “Students tend to learn as little or as much as their teachers expect. Teachers who set and communicate high expectations to all their students obtain greater academic performance from these students than do teachers who set low expectations.” Positive expectations create excitement and enthusiasm for everyone involved in a project. When the director is excited about a particular script, that energy sparks my imagination and inspiration quickly follows. As Carl Jung said, “ The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” The conceptual process works best when it is a collaborative experience.

Once positive expectations have sparked the creative force, in order to grow, it needs boundaries. The production concept should serve the needs of the script as well as the needs of students. Designing costumes that overtax the capabilities of the shop teaches nothing. Restrictions of budget, time, resources, and manpower are not a barrier to creativity but a gateway to innovation. “The enemy of art is the absence of limitations” (Orson Welles). Students also need boundaries. An effective teacher uses rules and procedures to create and maintain an environment in which instruction and learning can occur. It makes no difference whether I am teaching a traditional lecture course or a non-traditional lab class, every student wants and needs a clear idea of what is expected of him or her. Consequently, I spend a great deal of time at the beginning of the semester familiarizing my students with rules and procedures. My rules and procedures make my classes a very predictable and safe environment. However, nowhere are good management skills more vital than in a costume shop. A good manager establishes a productive working environment by delegating responsibility and creating a culture of teamwork. “The greater the time students work together and the greater the responsibilities students take for their work, the greater the learning” (Harry Wong). If you can create a sense of ownership in each student, they will work to their fullest ability to ensure the high quality of what they produce. At the beginning of each new production, it is important to create this sense of ownership in the actors as well as the technicians. Everyone involved in the production process needs the whole picture so that they will understand how my design choices fit in with production concept and how the production concept supports the author’s intent. It is important for the students to see in what way each one of them will contribute to our gestalt.

Once boundaries have been established, learning can take place. The third quality of an effective teacher is the ability to design lessons for student mastery. Mastery is the student’s demonstration that a concept has been comprehended or a skill can be performed at a level of proficiency determined by the teacher. To teach for mastery, a teacher must do two things: design lessons in which a student will learn a concept or skill and evaluate the learning to determine if the student has mastered the concept or skill. Student success in the subject matter will be the result of how well the teacher designs lessons and checks for mastery. As the teacher, I am constantly checking for understanding and then mastery. In my Stage Makeup class, students learn one skill every Tuesday then demonstrate their mastery of that skill every Thursday by realizing their designs on themselves. In the costume shop, students learn how to sew and then build a costume. “ We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way” (John Holt). It is the constant practice that firmly entrenches the skill in the student’s repertoire.

It is the constant searching for new ideas, new methods, and new imagery that continues to refill my creative well. Martha Graham best expresses my sentiments, “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.”