

THE ART OF TEACHING

By Lampo Leong, Ph.D.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." For a long time Laozi's philosophy has been the cornerstone of my approach to both art and teaching. First, we have the journey. That calls for a vision of a desired destination, a long-term goal. This, for me, stands for the greatness of all those artists of all times whose work belongs among humanity's finest achievements. The sense of the magnitude, the worthiness of this goal is at the heart of everything I want to communicate as an artist and teacher. In this respect, we who teach in the field of painting and drawing are especially fortunate; we have a genuine tradition of strong values and effective practices to transmit to our students. If, at the end of the day, I have played a role in motivating students to go after this goal for themselves, I feel I have contributed something of important value to this tradition.

But then, there is that crucial first step. For a number of students this is precisely the most challenging part. And this is where I see we have a real opportunity to stress that art should not be just for a few students with innate artistic talent. As more and more students choose to pursue higher education, we must be able to address the needs of the widest variety of backgrounds and aptitudes. My own experience, coming from an Asian background into an environment influenced mainly by European aesthetic traditions, has shown me the value of being able to re-invent oneself in the encounter between different cultures. From this unique perspective, I see the collision of different cultures and ethnicities, such as European, African-American, Latino and Asian, as a tremendous opportunity for art education. I strongly believe in the importance of respecting the legacies and heritage that students bring from their cultures while encouraging each one to search for a distinctive individuality. Thus, by valuing diversity we can best help our students to realize their full potential.

At the heart to my philosophy of teaching is the view that drawing and painting classes ought to be as integral a part of a total curriculum as a composition or mathematics class. This is why I try hard to integrate the traditional studio exercises with an approach that emphasizes the value of critical thinking. What I mean here is that I want students to appreciate that analysis is just as important for the artist as perception and expression.

Fundamentals are indispensable for artists of every level. In providing students with an integral sequence of challenges, I am committed to a highly engaged active learning methodology. Right from the start, I want students to take their steps in their own ways. For instance, in a learning unit focusing on an exercise in perspective, the students will first be introduced to the concept through a preview reading assignment in the textbook or Electronic Reserve Library online. Then I direct them to test what they have read against their own observations. The first fruits of this process become the focus for peer review and critical evaluation in a collaborative learning environment. Ideally this will help stimulate in them the desire to excel. And it's only after this immersion in exploratory experience of the concept that I even provide the lecture component. Now that they're actively engaged in the material, really using their eyes and thinking, I encourage them to revise the project. I see my role here as that of a team leader, and I want to stimulate real feedback and self-assessment in the class discussions, a lively spirit of give-and-take between the students themselves. What I really like is

when I can get them to see that this process, the one we are engaged in right now, is how artists really work. This rich dialogue that arises from an active engagement between artists involved with their experience in the world, their questions about it—this is how things like perspective got developed in the first place.

The objective I mean to stress here comes under the heading of meta-knowledge. The classroom experience I want to facilitate is one that is grounded in an understanding of the learning process that integrally relates the component parts to a total context. That is, as students acquire a solid technical foundation in painting and drawing, they are getting more than practice in a given skill. At the same time, because of the way the course is structured and presented, they are becoming familiar with their own ways of learning. This means they can fit these same steps of application, implication, and integration into other learning challenges. They can begin to see for themselves the relation of critical thinking and problem solving to methodologies operative in different disciplines. As just one example, the art class can reinforce the writing intensive course by stressing its own version of the role of revision in any productive communication process. And having grasped this, the students have the opportunity to carry these same approaches to learning beyond the classroom, out of the academic environment and into their professions and communities. Art education can do this, because art, as I see it, is as much about communication, concepts, and language, as it is about aesthetics. For me, art is about visualizing conceptually, and finding ways to transcend the limits of what has been expressed before.

Moreover, as we know, the changing paradigms of art run parallel to scientific evolution. In this new information age, computer technologies and the World Wide Web play an ever more important role in education. These new technologies offer a wealth of alternative ways for students to access and integrate new theoretical concepts into their store of practical knowledge. Combining text and images in all sorts of creative and interactive formats, the programs students find on the web can put the whole world, its art, its history, and its philosophies at the students' fingertips. In this way, learning experience is made enjoyable, stimulating, open, and lasting.

In addition to the technical and conceptual aspects of art education, students can also benefit from the lively interaction with the creative community that practicing artists can provide. Certainly, I recognize the need to be a role model and a facilitator for my students—demonstrating my passion and devotion to art, while at the same time communicating as clearly as I can in order to challenge and inspire. Hoping to stimulate them intellectually, I expose students to great examples of art and help them develop a sophisticated taste, a critical eye, and more importantly, the craving for knowledge. I have an obligation, I believe, to serve as a link between past and future generations. I believe that the great art of the past, the great art appearing now, the art to which I have dedicated my life, was really made by and for people just like our students. As I help them to develop their individual style, I do my best to ensure the liveliness and longevity of the art I love by upholding a standard of teaching that honors discipline as well as creative expression, that rewards effort equally with talent, and that values communication as highly as vision. My ultimate wish is to open a path for students that will lead them to discover and actualize their own values. At the same time, I want them to realize that this path is no other than the one by means of which art of transcendent value has always been achieved.