

## Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Issue 5 Winter 2012

---

# Regarding Student Collaboration in Art & Design

Cherie Fister  
*Maryville University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fister, Cherie "Regarding Student Collaboration in Art & Design," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 5 (2012), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss5/6>

## **REGARDING STUDENT COLLABORATION IN ART & DESIGN**

**Cherie Fister**, M.F.A. Maryville University

### **Description of the Art & Design Environment**

Those of us who teach art or design in higher education have long enjoyed a learning environment that appears, and genuinely is, conducive to strong and individual relationships with students. Class periods for studio courses are long (between two-three hours), lectures are infrequent, the knowledge, skills, and processes we hope to share combine physical techniques and ways of seeing and communicating.

### **It is very public learning**

I tell art and design students that they are brave to learn so publicly. The learning process is literally visible in each class as students draw on paper, sketch their ideas, or design on the computer. As teachers, we see and are able to question or participate in their progress on a daily basis. When you are able to *be* with students *as* they think or create, both the struggle and deep concentration are observable. One can be an invitation for a timely conversation; the other simply noted for future reference.

The students also know they are expected to be responsive to the work of their peers during in-process and final critiques. They routinely share what they observe and think about another person's work with the class, learning to compliment successes, be direct with constructive criticism, and offer suggestions for development.

The multi-faceted dialogue (faculty/student, individual student/individual student, and group peer review) is an integral component of this kind of teaching and learning. It is an ongoing dialogue that begins in foundations courses and is practiced with increasing sophistication and ease through capstone experiences. This consistent "public" dialogue is present in every studio experience and companions individual, private creative growth.

### **Growth and marks of success are very individual**

Because creative thinking and innovative solutions are valued, there are few right answers. While students must acquire measurable skills and techniques to realize their ideas, evaluations are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and subject to context and personality. Teaching and learning is often a series of one-to-one assessments of where a student is *now* and what is *next*. "Is this the best you are capable of right now and is that a distinct difference from where you were at the beginning of this project/course?" Individual conversations about learning are the norm.

These circumstances alone offer the potential and likelihood for strong student influence in the teaching-learning dynamic. Those of us in the art & design culture generally believe we are

doing a pretty good job of working directly with students and engaging with them in the learning process. This satisfaction may have kept us from seeing just how much fuller a collaboration we might enjoy.

Student ability and personality play an obvious role in directing the pace and tenor of a studio classroom. But how often do we ask them to help shape *what* or *how* they learn? What might happen if we bring students into the conversation *earlier* – when curriculum is being created? when decisions about the physical environment are being made? when leadership is being distributed?

### **Enter SoTL as an Agent of Change to Deepen the Participation of the Learner in the Teaching-Learning Process**

As is clear from the essays in this journal, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has come to play a significant role in the culture of our university. Within the Art & Design faculty, five of the nine full-time faculty and one of our senior adjunct faculty has or is participating in a two-year faculty seminar dedicated to serious classroom inquiry. Each of these faculty has (or is) constructing a formal scholarly inquiry derived from a pressing and specific question, issue, or concern embedded within the context of one of our courses. The data they collect inform our understanding of their work and student response to it. I see this as a tremendous commitment to student learning and, as Director of the Art & Design programs, a remarkable opportunity to cultivate programmatic discussions of our philosophy regarding teaching and learning in our discipline. This could include explicit ways we might implement our values and beliefs in each course to create a heightened and more deliberate overall sense of student empowerment and faculty/student collaboration.

As I review my own inquiry as well as the work of my colleagues, what I see is that our involvement in SoTL and the activities of the Center for Teaching and Learning, have brought both methodology and intentionality to our communication/conversation with students. And I see this as a precursor to the kind of full-bodied “student voice” that others suggest (Werder & Otis, 2010; Cook-Sather, 2011).

### **Methodology (Data Collection in Art & Design?)**

During our SoTL seminar experience, several faculty from different disciplines versed in quantitative research struggled to embrace the contextual, thematic nature of qualitative methodology that characterizes much of SoTL and action research. In contrast, I think those of us in the arts had to tighten up in order to carefully articulate a singular and very specific question, to methodically enact a systematic inquiry, and to even see ourselves doing of this kind of research. Much of our graduate school and professional experience was spent in pursuit of an individual voice, creating for galleries or design studios the most innovative and original work of which we were capable.

As teachers, artists can often be exceptionally sensitive to students and responsive, reflective practitioners. We openly value informed intuition and trust gut-feelings. I believe we operate very well in the present, responding to the nuances of person and situation. We are, however,

often informal in our planning, questioning, analysis. We usually ask students to document the progress of important projects but rarely about their experiences in the learning and doing of art/design.

The point is, doing SoTL made us develop a structure, entertain a larger conversation with students, and engage with them in a purposeful way as a group. Doing SoTL made us ask specific questions of the whole class and record what they said in a way that could be reviewed and analyzed and shared. Our studies required us to intentionally and specifically ask students what they were thinking/learning so we could accordingly change the ways we were teaching. Through this fresh kind of communication with our students, I think SoTL has provided the conduit for a new and more direct collaboration with them.

### **An Intentional Conversation**

For instance, in his inquiry John Baltrushunas introduced a writing component into his first-year design courses. A five-minute reflection essay each day opened up a personal and immediate dialog between John and his students. It quickly communicated the effectiveness of his teaching and the quality of the students' understanding of the design process.

Caren Schlossberg-Wood wanted to encourage her advanced students to take more creative risks. The class investigated existing models of design innovation in process and product. Caren then created opportunities for students to practice these idea-generating scenarios without any grade consequence. Along the way, her observational notes and student responses to the experience (immediate reflective essays and follow-up surveys) enriched her understanding of students' response to her attempts to increase innovative thinking.

In an effort to help her capstone students more clearly understand and appreciate the value of a well-expressed concept statement in guiding a major design project, Darlene Davison enhanced the attention spent on the development and refinement of the concept. Then throughout the project, students submitted written evaluations of the relationship between the concept and their design experience.

As part of my own inquiry with sophomore students, I routinely prompted them to pause and take note (document) where they were in their problem-solving process and what was left to accomplish. Or if we had had a fairly complex and active class, I might ask them to recall and capture what had occurred that day in a diagram or chart. I came to see these written exercises not only as a reflection for them individually, but as a record of our larger studio conversation (data!).

At another time, I investigated a process in which I guided beginning students in the adoption of a theoretical framework of design elements and principles as a practical tool for creating meaningful visual communication. Their final projects asked them to produce a non-representational composition whose message could be "read" and critiqued by their colleagues. Though, at some level, each of us has learned to derive meaning from visual elements (e.g., color, texture, proportion, contrast, etc.) it is quite another thing to understand visual elements and principles well enough to create meaning symbolically.

What's poignant here is that one of these students, now a senior, is translating this design framework as he understood it into a series of children's books that explain, shape, line, and texture. I was excited because I felt I had taught something complex to young college students, but *his* goal is to teach children to communicate visually as a way to be more clearly understood. It is a project on which we plan to work together.

In each of these examples, faculty moved into a more explicit dialogue about learning with students. What I see is the potential of SoTL to act as an agent of change (our agent of change) to bring students into a role of partnership and leadership in our educational community.

### **Awareness of the Learner's Place in Shaping the Learning Environment**

Through various SoTL and ISSOTL participation, I've become increasingly aware of the capability of our students and the desirability of inviting them to join faculty in determining their educational experiences. At Maryville, I am faculty member, program director and assistant dean. In those roles, I see there are varied opportunities for consideration.

#### **• Curriculum planning**

This could be just about as straightforward or as complex as we would like. Last semester it was as easy as meeting with students and asking, "What kind of new courses would you like considered for next semester's schedule?" It could mean including them in programmatic reviews.

#### **• Student/faculty discussions on important questions or decisions**

For instance, should a student be part of a faculty hiring committee? We ask for their evaluations as a student in a teaching demonstration. What about the opportunity to be part of an interview and ask questions as a member of our teaching/learning community?

#### **• Student focus groups on critical thinking**

As our entire campus participates in an accreditation project devoted to critical thinking and works to develop a definition reflective of the Maryville experience, we are including students in the developing phase as well as the "testing" phase. Sophomores and seniors in my graphic design program piloted the student focus groups.

#### **• Collaboration in design, professional and research projects**

Within Art & Design programs there are many first-rate professional activities and opportunities for our students. I am beginning to see that as faculty we may "provide" too many of them — that in our effort to facilitate good experiences, we are missing out on collaborations and important leadership lessons by failing to bring students in earlier and asking them, "Is this important to you? What should it look like and shall we do this together?"

Regarding student voice, Maryville can tell stories of change and varying degrees of success. But rich groundwork has been laid and there is potential for meaningful work, deep partnerships and lasting change.