

The Why... of Teaching Artistry



By Elise May, Theater Teaching Artist

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How often do you ask yourself why you do what you do?

When I started as a Teaching Artist, long before that term was coined, my work consisted of sharing my expertise in a particular area with a particular audience. My measure of success was whether or not I was asked back. If I was, it meant a job well done; if not, I took on the no call-back mantra of “they must have wanted someone taller, shorter, thinner, you name it.”

I don’t think I questioned why I took these jobs; it was something one did to supplement income while pounding pavement. The “gig” mentality was what helped to pay the rent. I wasn’t a teacher in the same classroom every day with the same students. I could justify the gigs while I was pursuing making a living as a performing artist.

Through the years, my interest in and practice of teaching artistry developed dramatically. Somewhere along the way, working a teaching “gig” wasn’t good enough anymore and a career path was born. I can’t tell you exactly when this happened but I found it harder and harder to let go of a gig. I would reflect on what I had done, what landed with the students and what the classroom teachers’ feedback was long after the gig was over. I wondered what I might do differently to achieve a desired goal. Working with a wide range of participants, teachers, administrators, corporate executives and non-profit administrators helped me focus on what I saw as a need to clarify my practice. In a world that demands quantifiable results, I found myself constantly defending the process-based ideal of my work and the

value of the arts for those who may not seek a career as a performing artist but could benefit from what experiential arts training could do for them in any field they pursued.

I started assessing the quality of my programs from the points of the view of all involved. Did the program meet expectations? Were there noticeable changes in the participants? Was the number of sessions sufficient? Were there benefits seen outside the program, in other classes or social situations? I ended up with a mass of information from diverse perspectives; teachers, students, parents, administrators, participants, assistants, audiences and more. I used this information to evaluate, adjust and reflect on my programs.

While this “outside looking in” approach helped me analyze my efficacy (and certainly helped me get more funding and work), I still felt something was missing. At first, I thought perhaps I wasn’t asking the right questions. Perhaps I needed to take an “inside looking out” approach. No one ever questioned my passion or expertise, but I felt the need to question my purpose and clarify why I was doing what I was doing.

While taking the Advanced Teaching Artist Lab at Lincoln Center Education, one of the areas of focus was exactly this: the why of teaching artistry, defined as Teaching Artist Philosophy. It is easy to tell anyone who asks what a teaching artist does and how important it is. However, going deeply into personal philosophy about why we do it requires introspection.

Looking across the expanse of my years of work, honing a single philosophy felt like a mammoth task.

Fortunately, Jean E. Taylor, Lincoln Center Teaching Artist, was there to guide the process. A Master TA with Lincoln Center, Jean spoke of her profound admiration and joy of knowing philosopher Dr. Maxine Greene, who played a substantial role in the shaping of Lincoln Center Education’s teaching philosophy from the very beginning, in 1976, when the organization was known as Lincoln Center Institute. Jean stated, “Dr. Greene believed deep personal engagements with works of art served as catalysts—causing us to perceive in new ways. She thought that if we (and our students) could see more possibilities in works of art, we might see more possibilities in our own lives, and eventually in the world around us.”

On a more personal note, Jean shared: “When Maxine passed away, in May 2014, I reflected on the importance of her philosophy in my life and work as a teaching artist. I realized that Maxine's deeply held belief in the power of the imagination (poetic, ethical, and social) had become part of my personal philosophy. Maxine's call to action, “to imagine the world as if it could be otherwise,” has led to greater rigor and sustainability in my teaching artist practice. I am convinced that a personal teaching artist philosophy is one's true north.”

While feeling very inspired, I didn't know where to begin. Sharing that our philosophy is informed by our own experiences, Jean set us on the first task: finding an example of our practice, a single teaching experience that had resonated and had meaning. “Practice is philosophy in action,” Jean asserted, “so focusing on one example of your practice will help you define your philosophy.”

Choosing one example would be difficult. I have many programs for diverse populations and never thought one size fits all. How could I craft a single philosophy from disparate experiences? I opted for a residency where one elementary and one high school ESL teacher brought their students together to create a mentorship program and charged me with creating a theatrical performance for the group. One goal was to build capacity for communication confidence in English. This involved scripting a play from a picture book about diversity and including personal individuality statements. It was an amazing experience, which was later included in a book called *In It Together: How Student, Family and Community Partnerships Advance Engagement and Achievement in Diverse Classrooms* by Debbie Zacarian and Michael Silverstone (Corwin Press, 2015).

Jean then asked us to identify three behaviors or actions we applied to enhance or reach goals. Mine were:

1. I learned some Japanese and Spanish.
2. I journaled about the mentor/mentee relationship.
3. I met with the students at each school independently and together (when budgets and busses allowed).

We were then asked to create statements starting with “I believe...” based on the actions outlined above. Mine were:

1. I believe that I need to be able to express myself in someone else's language to be able to help them express themselves in English.
2. I believe understanding the interpersonal, multicultural relationships in a classroom helps create a safe, respectful, and productive environment.
3. I believe that high school ESL student capacities for expression in English can be enhanced by structured play with younger children, supported by follow-up and reflection on their own turf.

The next part of this exercise to create a personal TA philosophy was to complete the sentences below:

I am

I believe

Because of my beliefs I

The field of teaching artistry is (or the arts are)

And because of this I aspire to

I am a socially conscious, entrepreneurial Teaching Artist who uses theater to enhance vocal empowerment and communication skills.

I believe every person has the need to connect and communicate with others. I believe every person has a story to tell, however, those who have different communicative abilities than the majority of the community in which they find themselves, sometimes feel judged as less worthy. I believe every person has the right to be heard and understood.

Because of my beliefs I use theater, voice, speech, and personal writing techniques to open up communication pathways to all populations in the hope of giving them the ability to feel the power of expression.

The field of teaching artistry is (or the arts are) necessary to create a more humane society of problem solvers who can make the world a better place to live in.

And because of this I aspire to help the voiceless to be heard, help the misunderstood and the challenged to express themselves, and help build communication confidence so all feel valued.

There, I did it! I actually wrote down why I do what I do.

I wondered if I would have arrived at the same conclusion if I had initially chosen a different teaching experience. I was intrigued enough to start over—with a program I created for students with special needs. My actions were very different, as were my reasons for taking them. But, to my great satisfaction, my philosophy statement still worked. It offered solid ground for my varied practice.

Jean says our personal Teaching Artist philosophy is both foundational and inspirational. It is the base we stand on as well as the heights we aspire to. Defining our personal philosophy nurtures our sustainability in the field.

I don't know that anyone who wants to hire me will ever ask me what my philosophy is. If they do—I'm ready! Every time I enter a space with my Teaching Artist hat on I will know exactly why I am there. And my clarity of purpose informs everything I do.

Elise May is an independent Teaching Artist, educator, actor, singer, writer and storyteller who has performed and taught in the U.S. and internationally. Elise works with school districts, libraries and corporations on communications skills, community development and developing educational programs using theater arts for vocal empowerment. Elise developed Storytime Theater, Expressive Elocution, Multicultural Voices, Creative Readers (an arts education inclusion program for students with disabilities) and more. Elise is on the board of several arts organizations including Stage the Change: Theatre as a Social Voice, a Teaching Artist for the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts, and a Steering Committee member of the Arts in Special Education Consortium. She was a contributing writer for the Teaching Artist Journal and Teaching Artist Guild Quarterly, and a contributing author of In It Together – How Student, Family, and Community Partnerships Advance Engagement and Achievement in Diverse Classrooms (Zacarian, Silverstone; Corwin Press). Elise has presented at many conferences, including Balanced Mind, the Annual Conference of the Bermuda Union of Teachers, NYSTEA Educator and Student Conferences, as well as to school administrators, teachers, and parents. www.expressive-elocution.com