

ADVISE TO MYSELF ON NAVIGATING ACADEMIA

Put the student first

It's easy to get sucked into a million different other aspects of life in higher-ed. Keep the student at the center, no matter what. That doesn't always mean they know everything, but if you're constantly looking out for them, you're starting from a good place.

Think like a student

What were you like when you were a student? What did you need? What worked well? What could have been better and how did you wish you had been treated and learned? What do these particular students look like now? What are they facing? Where are they coming from? Where are they going? These are the questions I always try to come back to.

Don't forget you're an artist

The reason you're here is because of the work you make and your ability to share that working process with others. Trust in it and share it and don't try to fit into some other preconceived notion of what you're supposed to do or be. You should feel the freedom to be yourself.

Proactivity

Very few will ask much of you until it's time for a review. It's up to you to create the program you want. Lead your productions and classes and interactions the way you wish they had been run when you were a student, the best of what you experienced, or the best you're able to do with what you have here and now.

Be Patient

Often times conflicts come out of communication errors, or differences in values. Sometimes it comes out of scheduling. Sometimes it comes from something you'll never know about. The more patient you can become, the easier the job will be.

Planning & Structure

The more planning and structure you can put in place, the better. Schedules, calendars, writing, etc. will help to stop starting over from square one over and over. We spend time reflecting after classes and shows, it's good to write it down and actually heed the lessons... but also:

Flexibility

Be prepared to throw out all your planning when an issue or interaction comes up that seems like it needs addressing, or the students need or want to learn in a different way or focus on a single aspect you hadn't considered or planned for. This doesn't necessarily take away from an overall goal or plan – it just might add to it.

Work and teach and interact across disciplines.

It's easy to get stuck in our department. It's really, really good for everyone if you reach out to others who are teaching and working here and in the community even if they're in seemingly disparate fields. Attend campus and town events, trainings, etc.

Don't Stop Working Professionally

It's difficult to keep up a professional resume alongside an academic one. This is our version of "publishing". It's vitally important to continue working in the professional field so that you are aware of the way the field is changing and emerging and so that you have the ability to teach that and model best professional practice. It also helps to keep things in perspective.

Try to keep ego at bay

The more it's about "you" and less about the students, the work, etc. the more difficult it becomes for everyone. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't be honest about who you are and what you know and are able to give and teach, but everything in this profession promotes ego. If you can work to keep it in balance it will make life better for everyone, starting with yourself.

Lead with best intentions

Start from a place of compassion. Assume others are too.

Almost none of us were trained as educators

Don't get mad at yourself when you're not immediately amazing with the students every single time you interact with them. We all went to school to study our subject matter, not necessarily to get training in teaching. You will become a beautiful educator if you work at it, but you shouldn't expect to jump in without training or experience and then be upset when it's not perfect right away. There's a bunch of resources available on to help. We're all still learning all the time.

Collaboration

It's a word that's sometimes used as a weapon in order to preserve systems of power or hierarchy or put more simply, to get one person or a group to do what another person wants but doesn't have the ability or time to do. In my mind, healthy collaboration is a conversation. One person speaks, then another adds their voice, thoughts, ideas, etc. Then another and another. It is based on equality and mutual respect for everyone's abilities and roles within a piece, a classroom, or a department. It leads to an organic, living form, not a preconceived product stemming from one voice or vision. Make a circle around the voices you want in the work, then make space for everyone in that circle to truly contribute. Let that process dictate the product, not the other way around.

Find a Third Way

Often times in a collaborative form like this, two-parties “want” two different things. Sometimes that arises from different expectations, communications, personalities, etc. Regardless, a “win” is not one person getting their way, and another not getting their way. If, after explaining and communicating clearly, there truly is a difference in perspective, work to find a third way together.

Explicitly Over-Explain

It’s shocking how much you might need to say, and then re-say, and say again and again. Both with students and other faculty, staff, and administrators. Sometimes I’ve found the best way is to start by stating the goal or intention, back it up however you’d like, let it get to a discussion, etc. then re-state the original goal or intention again.

Prove It

Especially with students, but also when working with colleagues here, I’ve found it’s best to write an email. Even (sometimes especially) if it’s a conversation that seems important – you can re-cap this in an email too. Back up your stance with facts, research or other input.

Clearly define expectations and then hold people accountable or let it go entirely

Often times students, and sometimes other educators or staff or administrators will disappoint. If you can clearly articulate the expectation beforehand, agree to a schedule, and then whatever it is, isn’t executed in time, to a degree you talked about, etc. either let that person face consequences, or move on. Don’t hold onto it.

Turn off work as much as you can at the end of the day.

When you do finally leave at the end of the day, try to leave work behind you. Make time for your own life, self, other work, etc. Initially, you will want to jump in the deep end. That’s great, but keep afloat so you don’t drown.

We work with a living art form

It is constantly shifting and changing. Every class, every production, every process shifts every time. This doesn’t have to be subtle. Every time, the student, educator, audience, culture and context changes; so too, can we.

The more work we can do by, for, and about others, the more we all grow.

I think it’s a lofty habit for all of us to get outside of ourselves as much as we can.

One of the most difficult lessons I still haven’t learned is how not to apply my values to others.

You can always re-establish the room you want.

If you can nourish an open and inviting culture that is respectful, honest and compassionate, but does not shy away from the brutal, uncomfortable, strange or rigorous, I believe you can create an exceptional learning environment.

Connect before content

It's good and right and more than ok to let people connect with each other before delving into the work, the learning process, the meeting, etc. I've found that a ritual or a custom to begin with is helpful to center everyone in the room and prepare for the real work to begin.

Endings are important too.

Often times, the class or the show is over without taking the time to celebrate, reflect, or just take a moment to say goodbye. It's important to acknowledge the endings of things as well.

***The goal of a college is actually very simple:
Preserve, Transmit, and Create Knowledge.***

Keep this in mind when it gets complicated.

***Having a job teaching and making art is exceptional and rare and valuable.
Nobody gets to do this for a living. Remember to be grateful for all of it.***

BOOKS THAT HAVE HELPED ME AS AN EDUCATOR

K Patricia Cross: Classroom Assessment Techniques

Neil Postman: The End of Education – Redefining Value in School

Daniel Kahneman: Thinking Fast and Slow

Al En DeSouza: How Art Can be Thought

Junichiro Tanizaki: In Praise of Shadows

David Bayles: Art and Fear

Jenny Odell: How To Do Nothing

Joshua Meyerowitz: No Sense of Place – The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior

Adrienne Maree Brown: Emergent Strategy

Paul Baker: The Integration of Abilities

Hans Thies Lieman: Post-Dramatic Theater

Pauline Oliveros: Software for People

Pretty much anything in the White Chapel series of books