

SYL ARENA

387 Whidbey Street • Morro Bay, California 93442
(805) 550-4514 • SylArena@gmail.com • SylArena.com

Teaching Philosophy

No one chooses the circumstances of their birth. For better or for worse, our upbringing exposes us to—or shields us from—the vast diversity that is the tapestry of humanity. As children, adolescents, and adults, we struggle with our evolving awareness of internal and external identities: class, cultural heritage, family lineage and structure, intergenerational traumas, emerging sexual identities, conformity, and unspoken expectations. When viewed through a transpersonal lens, we are all synergisms—interconnected beings who are more than the sums of our individual parts.

I embrace the diversity of life experience brought to the studio by my students. This acceptance simultaneously creates the obligation to honor their unique individualities through inclusive and culturally relevant relationships. In my current appointments, at Cuesta College on the Central Coast and at West Valley College in Silicon Valley, my students are a socio-economic amalgamation—coming from families of extreme affluence and from families of very humble means. Their cultural identities include Anglo and Hispanic, of course, but also include Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Pakistani. These diversities reinforce the importance of respecting the dignity of each individual and nurturing student success across all boundaries.

I believe in educational equity rather than in educational equality. I strive to give more help to those who need it the most. I also believe in the power of education to change our society. Thereby, I am greatly interested in empowering the success of first-generation college students; members of marginalized communities; and adult learners, such as veterans and stay-at-home parents.

In recent years, I have accepted that, as an educator, I must also have the mindset of a first responder and of a concierge. Suffering students cannot be successful students. If I am not open to the presence of my students as whole persons, then I will miss signs of anxiety, depression, abuse, hunger, housing insecurities, etc. I now include an entire section on *Well Being* in my syllabi along with a sincere pledge that I am willing to confidentially connect students to needed resources. I remind my students frequently that I care. To build trust and connection, I share vignettes of my personal history and allow my imperfection to shine through from time to time.

Although difficult to discern through this formal writing, I have a warm and convivial persona that eases student anxiety. I think of myself as a positive and encouraging teacher who serves as a “curator of information and experience.” While I hold my students to high standards, I also inspire self-confidence in their ability to achieve.

Through my teaching of photography, my students become engaged with the inherent connection between their humanity and the technologies upon which they increasingly rely. Having created photographs over many years in all manner of media—from primordial, hand-made emulsions to the latest digital technologies—I advocate that photography serve as a means of personal expression rather than as a means of consumerism. Students must understand that the photograph is created by the artist and not by the photographic machine.

SYL ARENA

Recognizing that few college students today have memories of their lives in a pre-iPhone world and that the main source of photography in their lives is the small screen in their pocket, I introduce photography as a study of four manifestations:

- *Image*—The visual elements of the photograph, which, in our digital world, many see as its only manifestation; that the digitally transmitted image *is* the photograph.
- *Object*—The physicality of the photograph on paper, metal, glass, fabric, etc. Physicality continues to be supplanted by the faux tangibility of the viewer's electronic device.
- *Facture*—The means of creating the photograph by hand and/or with a machine
- *Content*—The expression of the artist's idea through the merger of the above

I believe that context leads to an understanding of relevance and that history is best taught when it transports students to the then-current moment. For instance, to further an undergraduate's awareness of the evolution in social interaction driven by mobile technology, I have students research and speak critically about societal shifts brought about by Eastman's introduction of the Kodak Brownie #2 camera in 1901 and the resulting boom in picture postcards printed from personal photographs.

I believe that writing and speaking are essential life skills. Thereby, I frequently call upon my students to write statements of intention before starting a project followed by self-reflections as preparation for a critique. For the latter, students embed the "hero" shots from their projects into a discussion post on the class forum and then write about how the experience creating the work differed from the results anticipated in their original statement of intent.

I acknowledge that assessment in the visual arts poses unique challenges. Nevertheless, the process and product of student efforts must be assessed in order to facilitate growth, both in terms of measuring comprehension of essential concepts and in terms of developing the student's ability to express.

For technical exercises, I rely upon clearly stated rubrics as the means of assessment. Following the example of Dr. Atul Gawande's *Checklist Manifesto*, my greater purpose in providing detailed rubrics is to teach my students the importance of using checklists to assure success with complicated workflows.

For creative projects, I rely upon a hierarchy of tiered narratives for holistic assessment. These narratives lack the rigidity of a rubric and, thereby, reward innovative thought, creative action, and risk taking. For instance, the narrative criteria for an A-quality project would be:

The work clearly demonstrates a commitment to technical competency and creative thinking. Your work should reflect exploration, risk taking, and thinking with a photographic eye. A student in this category produces work that is "unique," and "special." This may be in the form of unusual insight, intelligence, and or creativity. Your work conveys an artist's attitude. Excellent technical proficiency. Conceptual development is of a high level.

No amount of well-curated theory or praxis will be of value if the student finds little connection to the moment in which they are experienced. While my teaching style is based on warmth, humor, and empathy, it is ultimately the modality of the one's preferred learning style—kinesthetic, auditory, visual, or verbal—that most affects the student's perceptions. Thereby I think it appropriate

SYL ARENA

to vary the means of engagement to optimize each student's resonance with the class experience. Fortunately, the typical class size at CCA makes the development of personalized engagement an achievable end.

Of course, learning styles do not segregate along lines of cultural difference, nor do the forces that cause one to feel socially marginalized. Crafting lessons that provide space for the differences among my students is my greatest responsibility. Beyond the more obvious cultural differences, transient differences such as their emotional states, the degree to which they have eaten and slept well, their domestic situations, etc. also feed into their unique identities at any given moment. Thereby, I strive to honor both their evolving individuality and their persistent imperfections. We are, I believe, always works in progress.