

Johnny Williams III: Statement of Teaching Interests

My first and greatest teacher was my mother, and while she taught me many things, three oft-repeated lessons have informed my work as a designer, scholar, and teacher beyond any others: “You weren’t born knowing how to do anything;” “Knowing how to do something is a gift, but doing it is a responsibility” “You are your art, and when you share it you share yourself.” In simplest terms, these are the basis of my teaching and the lessons that I want to impart to my students.

“You weren’t born knowing how to do anything”

The first class I taught at a college level was Production Practicum my second year of grad school. I was so excited to teach and to lead the classroom that I had forgotten the experience of being a student. My syllabus was scaffolded and well structured, but what was missing was engagement, time to get to know where each student’s experience lies and what areas they want to improve on. I realized by the second week that my lessons on “lighting fundamentals” and “how-to program cues” was material they were already familiar with and this review was not welcomed. I went back to the drawing board, moved some assignments around, and had one-on-one consultations with the students the next class period. I was able to ask important questions like, “why are you taking this class?” and “what do you hope to receive from this class?”. After these meetings I was able to build a more advanced curriculum with support of my fellow faculty members that challenged the students and made an environment in which they felt able to succeed but also supported to do so. I have noticed through this experience that I cannot teach a student body until I understand the student body and their needs. I have spent the five semesters teaching at MBU adapting my courses to fit the needs of the students while also creating lessons and assignments that challenge them. No one comes into this world knowing how to do anything, and I value this idea while teaching. I must learn the world I am in before I am able to teach in it.

“Knowing how to do something is a gift, but doing it is a responsibility”

Every design class I have ever taken has begun with a variation on the phrase “design can’t be taught, but I’ll try to give you the tools that can help you become a great designer.” This philosophy is fundamental to my approach to education. I view each class period in three phases. The first phase is the introduction. This is the lesson, the powerpoint I show, or the introductory worksheet I hand out. This is where the new information is presented and given to the class. The

bulk of the class tends to focus on the next step: the application. This is where we as a class work on hanging instruments, the steps of recording a cue at the board, the proper way to coil cords, working through safety protocols on the grid, or the ways to create the emotions needed for a scene through lighting. Most of the time spent in class I like to allow the students to get on their feet and try the material because the best way for students to learn in my experience is for them to try the material out for themselves. The final step is the implementation. This step happens after class ends. When students take the information and develop their own methodologies or theories on the practice. It takes the first two steps to allow students to be successful in the third. I give students the information they need to crawl, and then open up the classroom to allow us all to walk through the material, which then allows students the opportunity to take the material and dance.

For someone to get up on their feet and dance it takes a great deal of preparation. I remember thinking that designers and directors I looked up to were simply talented and that they had something I did not have. I felt this way until I was directed by one of my idols Sir Trevor Nunn, in a performance masterclass. After the masterclass I remember saying how talented he was and how wonderful his directing skills are. He scoffed and responded, "Talent is cheap, the work is the art". The biggest gift I can give my students is the knowledge of how to do something so that they can create the work and in turn the art.

"You are your art, and when you share it you share yourself"

Theatre has always been a place of refuge for me and a place where I felt power in being able to tell the stories of the world with the support of a community. An environment centered around telling someone's story while bringing a bit of each performer onto the stage is a magical thing. Everyone has a story to share and one that is worth staging. It is common practice to refer to my students as stars, not to build misplaced confidence or embarrass them, but to remind them that they shine and I notice it. For me, building a classroom or a rehearsal room that is centered around this idea makes the work feel more charged and purposeful. Not every student I have will share this idea or believe in the power of lighting design, but I make sure the students can see the power and effect it can have. Students whether they are majors or non-majors, lighting designers or actors, or just taking the class to fulfill a Gen Ed will be treated with the same amount of respect and attention that they deserve.

My assignments cultivate this understanding by challenging the students to access emotions and creativity with their designs. One of my most well received assignments is the Favorite Song's Lighting Design. I create a grid that students can work on to develop a couple cues that evoke the feeling and essence of their favorite song using color mixing, intensity, and fade duration. This assignment works well towards the beginning of the semester because it allows students to showcase more about themselves in an artistic way. When they share this design, they are sharing a new aspect of themselves which is something I strive to facilitate. Being a lighting designer is a powerful position with a great deal of responsibility and creativity, but also allows students a concrete way to create and share themselves by sharing their art.

When we are born we may know nothing, but through learning how to create, we are given the responsibility of sharing ourselves with an audience and that is a wonderful opportunity. My mom taught me so much about being a leader and more importantly how to be a gentle guide for others. Her three bits of advice have developed into my own teaching philosophy and continue to evolve as I continue to grow as an educator.