

CRAFTING CREATIVITY

by Susan Moss



Creativity is a seemingly simple idea: producing something new and of value. But this word is used in wide-ranging contexts, often exploited to promote and sell things—from a creative vegetable peeler to creative ways to meet your future husband. Such overuse can make it difficult to discuss creativity, what it is, and why it matters. Overuse and abuse contaminate the idea of creativity, and we might reasonably be wary of initiating a conversation on the topic of “teaching creativity.”

If you teach in the arts, an important aspect of your job is to facilitate and nurture your students’ creative potential. It may not matter if you believe creativity to be a teachable skill or a mysterious something inherent within an individual.

As a teacher, I am curious about strategies and challenges to “teaching creativity.” So I interviewed colleagues and peers about their teaching. All were artists who teach, with a wide range of experience levels in diverse contexts: workshop, art school, university art and design program, community college. Here is a sample of the interviews.

Environment

Sandra Brownlee sets the stage for teaching children. “Teaching in a shared elementary school classroom . . . I was conscious of the classroom setting so I placed a curtain at the doorway. Students pulled it aside in order to enter, a physical gesture marking movement from one realm to another.” While there was nothing special or permanent about the room where she taught, the curtain and gesture marked entrance to creative territory.

Janice Lessman-Moss’s experience is similar. She arranged for a studio space devoted to senior university students in a textile program that “makes them feel special and increases the sense of commitment and self-assurance.”

Others noted the value of a well-designed, well-equipped physical space and their efforts to maximize whatever space is available. Lighting, adequate and orderly arrangement of materials and tools, a place to take a break, a pass card or other way of marking entry into the studio, were viewed as important contributions to a seriousness about the work.

Classroom as community

Fran Dorsey explains, “My students have to research something they’ve always wondered about. When they report—on human sacrifice, different color theories, baking to relieve stress (accompanied with chocolate pie to share)—they also begin to form a supportive group dynamic. They talk about things unrelated to their own work, so the discussion is informal, stimulating, not risky. The seeds of a supportive classroom environment have been planted.” This assignment is given at the beginning of the term. It is not the research topic that matters, but the nature of the conversations that ensue.

Many teachers noted that what happens the first day or the first week is critical for shaping a positive group dynamic. It is considered the first order of business and an ongoing project. There is agreement that students’ sense of security affects how they engage, their willingness to explore, and ultimately what is learned.

A studio environment with a productive connection to the teacher and fellow students



ABOVE: JOANNA SCHLEIMER (student of DORIE MILLERSON) *Faith*
Handwoven linen with wool inlay, embroidery, crochet, 47" x 32", 2011.
Photo: Christine Lim.

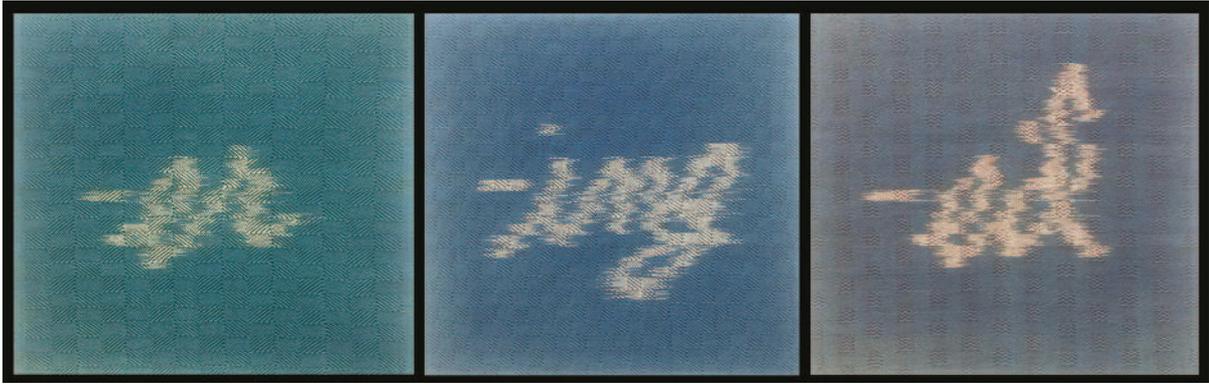
LEFT: NOEL PALOMO-LOVINSKI (student of JANICE LESSMAN-MOSS)
You’ve Come a Long Way Baby Pleated silk organza and silk
shantung, digitally printed with fiber reactive dye, 2013.
Photos: Joanne Arnett.

also contributes to feeling part of something bigger. Distinct approaches included: begin with the familiar; start with an assignment at a remove from art making; nudge students to jump into making, and save thinking or technical worries for later; eat together.

Materiality, physicality

Nearly everyone I talked with spoke about materials as essential to fiber and textiles—their primacy as a studies area, the importance of connecting to and having a passion for materials, expectations and associations of materials—these were recurring conversations. Materials imply or require a physical engagement, and physical responsiveness was emphasized.

When **Dorie Millerson** interviews new art school students, she wants to know what drives them: “If they want to design and have someone else make it, they’re likely not



AMANDA THATCH (student of CATHARINE ELLIS) Cotton, Ikat-dyed, handwoven, 14" x 15" each, 2014. Photo by the artist.

candidates for a materials program. In the fiber field, your passion is sparked by working with materials."

Exploration, focus, hard work

Teaching in a community college, **Shanna Robinson** pushes her students. "Make ten more!" They've heard it so many times that "they laugh and roll their eyes, then get on with it." Her goal is to dismantle the notion that creativity is "an amorphous cloud of inspiration," and get them to revisit an idea, analyze what works, what doesn't, "with the back-and-forth

between making and evaluating as a path to new solutions."

It is difficult for students to navigate between a huge landscape of ideas embedded in and associated with materials. What is involved in zeroing in and digging deeper? Teachers, keenly aware of the need to map and make explicit one's creative process, design exercises, assignments, and situations that require movement between exploration and analysis. **Susan Brandeis** not only requires extensive sampling, but also has students keep notes:



REBECCA WRIGHT (student of AMIE ADELMAN)
Dialogs with an American Hoarder Mixed media,
23" x 20" x 10", 2011. With detail.



MARYLINE COLLIOUD-ROBERT (student of MICHAEL JAMES) *Ciao Bella* Commercial fabrics, machine appliqué, piecing, quilting, 43.7" x 22.5" each, 2009. Photo by the artist.

"Try these 10 basic stitches; explore a single stitch, exploiting it in different ways, distorting it; use stitching as drawing; stitch on non-traditional materials; and so on." Students then write about what they did, what was good, what triggered it, what they want to develop further, and why.

Other educators reiterated the importance of a play between exploration and concentration, urging students to move productively between these extremes. **Catharine Ellis** says that individual students need different things at different stages, "a push, reining in, affirmation—but all eventually have to concentrate in order to create something that's their own." Former student **Amanda Thatch** credits Ellis' quick perceptiveness for "sending her on a path tailored to my interests and aesthetic."

Fran Dorsey characterizes her students as already really inventive, their heads "popping with ideas I help them hone in on an individual question and see what's universal about that question. Sometimes the idea is huge, and they need help breaking it down into steps."

Embedded in ideas about exploration and focus is another essential ingredient—work.

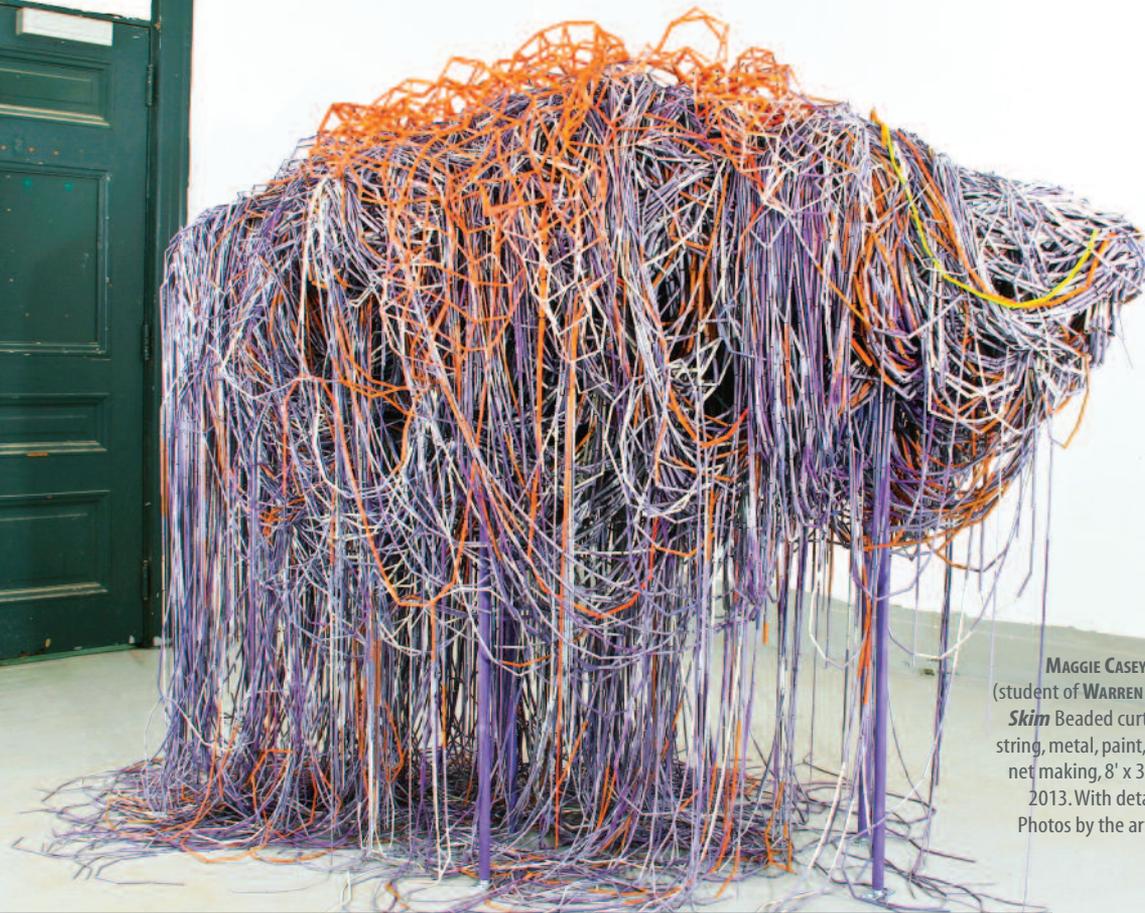
Michael James insists that creativity and practice cannot be separated. "Creativity is an investment of labor. If you really work, there will be rewards."

Amie Adelman agrees: "The whole point, the way one gets ideas, is by working, so if you stop working you shut yourself down from generating ideas. I have to put my own biases aside and encourage them to carry on working." Adelman's former student **Rebecca Wright** describes her as open to experimentation, including Wright's "organized hoarding," and says critiques with Adelman "always promoted being more creative."

Respect

Susan Brandeis voices a concern: "What can be harder than helping a student find her own voice is helping her accept that voice." Caring for students was a thread through all of the interviews. Teachers tune into a student's idiosyncrasies along with the dynamics and needs of the larger group. They hone their skills in recognizing and responding to the different ways people learn.

Everyone I spoke with talked about their students in ways that marked a deep respect and sensitivity. Fran Dorsey tries "to look attentively,



MAGGIE CASEY
(student of WARREN SEELIG)
Skim Beaded curtains,
string, metal, paint, wood,
net making, 8' x 3' x 6',
2013. With detail.
Photos by the artist.





DELANEY CATE
 (student of **AARON MCINTOSH**)
Suture Various hand-dyed fabrics, yak hair, ceramic, oil paint, 36" x 45", 2014.
 Photo by the artist.

saying what I see and don't see, being a gentle voice that's honest and validates ideas, even if they aren't visible in the work yet." The importance of not giving up, not writing any student off, was also noted. "I love teaching rank amateurs," **Warren Seelig** shared, "zeroing in on how they connect to stuff, to materials. Physical sensations juice them in ways that words don't."

Art and life

Teaching in a creative field means guiding, challenging, finding ways to inspire. While it is not possible to teach someone to be unique, it is possible to help students go deeper, make connections, develop a critical awareness, and find things they love doing. "Everything about one's life influences creativity," explains **Aaron McIntosh**. "I want to help students bring their own artistic practice and daily life into the same creative space and let them inform one another."

Lisa Klakulak teaches felting, encouraging her students "to push the material and technique to a point where it might not work, to the edge of what's possible—that's how we do innovative work." She also talked about how art and life are interwoven. "Making is a powerful way to process the complexities of life. It can be calming, and following something through gives one a feeling of accomplishment. It builds confidence about how to be in the world."

Interviewees emphasized connections between their own studio practice and work as

educators. Encountering and solving problems in the studio informs teaching, making a conversation with students as equals possible.

Teaching is an investment that shapes responsive, intuitive approaches, such as lateral moves that catch a student off guard, allowing him to see a problem in a new way, to get unstuck. The teachers' own ongoing learning allows them to step back and be instructed by students. They applaud when a student's confidence translates to a willingness to risk, invent, stumble, revise, and find new potential in the power of the creative process.

I am grateful for the openness and generosity of interviewees:

Amie Adelman, www.amieadelman.com
 Susan Brandeis, www4.ncsu.edu/~brandeis/
 Fran Dorsey, www.francesdorsey.com
 Catharine Ellis, www.ellistextiles.com
 Hollie Heller, www.hollieheller.com
 Michael James, www.michaeljamesstudioquilts.com
 Lisa Klakulak, www.strongfelt.com
 Janice Lessman-Moss, www.janicellessman-moss.com
 Aaron McIntosh, www.aaronmcintosh.com
 Dorie Millerson, www.doriemillerson.com
 Warren Seelig, www.warrenseelig.com

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