

TEACHING ART | EPISODE 2: NOTES ON THE TEACHER

JESSE BALL

Well, my experience with education in general was quite bad. Which is not to say that there aren't remarkable teachers like struggling across the United States to do a wonderful job. I'm sure there are. And I certainly have spoken to people who talk about this teacher or that teacher. And I had a couple of teachers who were... they work quite good. But always, those people are like cool and the battling against the waves with the sword.

DENNIS

And what are the waves?

JESSE BALL

Oh. Well, the waves are just that, generally, the more experimentally or the more you want to teach with intuition, the more the administrations are against you. So, you're not only... it's hard enough to be adventurous and to teach in a beautiful way. Just that's a large test by itself. And then on top of that to be using one hand to fend off administrators is... makes it more difficult. So, that's kind of what I was referring to.

And then when I did have good teachers, they tended to be teachers who were putting on some kind of a really remarkable performance that emanated from their, I don't know, some kind of genius, or like a deep, powerful empathy, really like bravo performances. And I did have teachers like that, a few in college. Like 1 in college, a couple of different times. And I just think that this is no way for a mechanism to function. Like, if you have a... if you want to have a spoon and eat soup with a spoon, it doesn't have to be the best spoon that anyone ever made. A regular simple spoon is fully sufficient to eat soup.

And this is the way that education should be, that the system is set up so that you don't need, I don't know, Socrates to teach you something. It can just be like a regular thoughtful person, and within the resources of the class, and the preparatory material, that's sufficient for incredible progress to be made,

DENNIS

Welcome to *Teaching Art*, a three part collaged audio-essay in which I, as somebody who teaches art, try to find out what that exactly means: what should we teach? Who should we be when we teach it? And what kind of space should the art academy be? In this episode, we'll focus on that second question. What kind of teachers do we need?

I've started this episode with a lengthy quote by author and teacher Jesse Ball on his own experience as a student. I asked him about it, because in his book *Notes on my Duncce Cap* he wrote about how uncomfortable he was when he was first asked to teach. That discomfort stemmed from distrusting the system, the mechanisms of teaching.

For me, it was quite different. I was ready to go. I wanted to teach. I didn't even consider the system I would be operating in. To be honest, I had no idea. I just had my plans, my assignments and my massive powerpoints. I thought I had it figured out until I started doing it.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Because like when I started teaching, I started stepping very strongly at the very beginning. And I remember once I had like 15 students and only 2 remained after the first 3 months. So, the Director of Studies of Escuela des Escritores just like basically she called my attention like, "Hey, I mean you had like 15 students and only 2 are left."

DENNIS

You just heard Lorena Briedis, a fellow writer and teacher at Escuela Des Escritores in Spain. And though I did not lose any students Like Lorena did... In my first years of teaching, I was still dissatisfied with what I taught. Or maybe more precisely: how I taught it. I felt like a lot of it wasn't connecting.

In hindsight I can see at least one thing I didn't realize then and that is: I was teaching creative writing the way I was taught philosophy at University. I was used to long lectures, lots of assignments, having to read a lot. But that wasn't how I learned creative writing. I learned that through messing

around, reading yes, but reading all over the place, following my instincts. And I mostly learned it from talking to fellow writers, to friends. Problem was: I had no idea of how to teach that and frankly, I was getting frustrated about it.

JOHN VIGNA

I think the thing we need to remember is that it's okay not to know everything or feel you have to know everything as the instructor. I think it's a lot more liberating to help you meet the students where they're at when you're able to work with, again, decentering your kind of role in the place, and not being the kind of so-called 'sage on the stage', right? I'm really trying to be open to learning from them. Because we have so much to learn from them, whether they're first-year students or high-functioning grad students.

And I think we get away from what's really true and good about teaching when we stop seeing the process as a 2-way exchange. If we just see it as a 1-way exchange where we're just disseminating information, that's a zero-sum game in the end. It's not going to make for a sustainable activity. It's not going to feed well into our own kind of writing careers or our own teaching careers. But if we see this constantly as this exciting exchange of ideas and perspectives and things to think about, then I think this is probably one of the most powerful ways to kind of advance and feel fresh toward our teaching perspectives, whether it's in the current environment we're in now, or in this future kind of utopian art school that we're sort of musing about.

DENNIS

I guess that was my biggest mistake starting out: being too much of a teacher. I believe my intentions were in the right place. I really wanted them to succeed and I thought it was my job to be a knowledge machine: spewing out story structures, literary terminology and a selection of the best works ever made, according to me. I wanted them to not take the long road I took. Essentially I was telling them everything I knew in a semester.

But by doing so, not only did I take away their chance to discover these things themselves, I also (though inadvertently) reproduced the hierarchy

that I was used to from studying philosophy, a hierarchy that was maybe one the students had run into before.

JESSE BALL

Well, it's complicated, because a hierarchy, it doesn't necessarily have to be like determinately a bad thing, or we could say that it can be quite useful in learning in a way one wants for oneself to be, at all times, ready to take lower status and to subordinate oneself to people who know more than you do about things in order to learn from. But that has to be a process that emerges from you and that you control, so that when it's time for you to break like, intellectually from what the... like the speaker is saying, you're prepared and strong enough to... often in hierarchies that are enforced from above, you don't get the opportunity for these kinds of breaks.

So, I think hierarchy that is created from below where you're just as a function of learning is essentially like... is the beginner mind of Zen mind where you're looking to others, all as teachers. Everyone is your teacher in some way. So, I think it can be good in that sense. But there's just too much of it already in society, especially in like invisible and sort of destructive ways that mass media complex creating a vision of like a life, like a celebrity life or the life of the people on television that you can never live, that then makes you feel that your own life is inferior to that life. So, already there's this hierarchy of like here on the bottom is the life that you're living.

And then the tendency of human beings is not to attempt to rise up, but to just keep others down below them. So, if you know you want to like keep other people from being like jumped up like trying to reach the higher level. So, I think this is a like a disastrous way of being, which is why I talk in that book about the classroom trying to be an exception to this exterior landscape.

DENNIS

I was creating a hierarchy, because I thought that was what teaching was. A sage on the stage, as John Vigna put it earlier. When he first started teaching, he had a different approach.

JOHN VIGNA

I grew up in a time, many of us did, when teaching, our model teachers taught differently than perhaps we might be teaching today. And I don't mean that in a negative way. It was just a sign of the time. Some were very strict. Some were very... didn't seem to have a lot of compassion or empathy for the students. And I always remembered in my university experience as an undergraduate student. And when I struggled, as most of us do at some point during our undergrads, is that the moments I remember most, where it's not the content I learned, but were the moments of kindness from various instructors that just offered some ventilation for my life at that time, whether I was struggling to get an assignment in on time, whether I was struggling to understand concepts within the course or something is that they would seem to have taken the time and shown interest in a way that could sort of offer me a way to kind of continue to grow, instead of to feel like I was always behind or shamed into not knowing and keeping up.

DENNIS

John decided to be that empathetic teacher, the kind one. But still, it was hard to let go of some of the things we believe a teacher has to be...

JOHN VIGNA

I couldn't separate out as well in the early days also being kind of a little more rigid around like guidelines for assignments, submission times and all of these things. And so, that was kind of in contrast with trying to be more empathetic as an instructor. And I noticed a real tension in myself and doing this, because I didn't like playing good cop bad cop within myself. I didn't see any value in it after a while. And it just created kind of too much conflict within myself. But also, I saw that it wasn't helping students sort of reach their better selves, their writer selves basically. And I only have one goal when I'm teaching a class, and that's for the students to have a sensational learning experience, so that they may consider still writing beyond this course instead of, quote, "Writing is not for me," which has happened to so many people in other experiences with it. I didn't want to... I didn't want them coming through my classroom with that experience. I wanted them to sort of discover a love for writing, even if they didn't think they could see it coming.

And so, as like the years went on, I continue to work with the course material. I started to... and I started to feel more comfortable in my own skin as a teacher. I started to let go of the rigidity. And when I started to let go of the rigidity with the way that I would sort of approach and handle students, it just opened up a whole new experience in teaching, in which I could be a little more authentically myself instead of just my teacher self. Because we all wear different sort of selves when we're in front of the classroom. And by being a little more authentic myself, I realized I would just like accept them for where they're at. I don't need... it doesn't need... why am I being rigid about any of these things? And so, this was quite a while ago.

And I found that from that point on, I loved teaching even more because I was no longer in conflict with myself or other students around. Like, the things that would disappoint me, whether they didn't do an assignment and hand it in, or whether they did it... it was apparent to me that they didn't put a lot of effort into it or anything like that, I could work with that and start to see like, "Well, why is it that they're like that? Oh, it's because they have a lot of other courses in their lives or stresses and life situations and stuff." So, this real kind of focused empathy really changed everything.

DENNIS

I had a hard time letting go of that rigidity too. Not only was I reproducing the way I was taught, I believed that being strict with deadlines and attendance, I was preparing the students for work in the actual field. Again, best intentions, but not effective at all.

In the end, I decided on letting go of my authority completely. It did feel like the relief John just described. But it brought another crisis. With my old model discarded, I had to figure out what the new model would be.

LORENA BRIEDIS

I think that it also comes a lot from you as a teacher being an open wound. When I go there, I don't go protecting myself. And that's sharpness that comes from being like personally nude, it pierces like the atmosphere of the whole room and the students. I think that when you show your own mystery, people become more [inaudible]. I don't know how to say in

English, like compulsive. I mean, if you show your wound and you just show it naturally, and you show how to feel comfortable with that, I think that's an implicit, energetic implicit invitation to just be like that. So, it starts from the teacher being an open wound to the students, and like to generate a horizontal environment. I always start also my classes saying that I don't consider myself as a teacher, but in Spanish would be *compañera*, companion, sort of.

Because etymologically speaking companion, *compañera* in Spanish means the one that shares the bread and the pathos, and the suffer. And I always say that in the sense that our workshop is like our feast as well, like a space to share the bread that is the word, every word. And the pathos, the difficulty of taking every word, like to taking out every word from silence, that traumatic experience of taking language out of silence. And at the same time, I'm a companion, a *compañera*, not only of bread, but also the of wine in the sense that in wine, we celebrate joy, the joy of having taken language out of silence, and the joy of poetry, of being able to share that other dimension of language that is singing. And it's related more to poetry than to narrative in that sense.

DENNIS

So in stead of sages on stages, we have to become *compañero's* and *compañera's*. I don't know enough about the spanish language to make up a non-binary version of that word, but please consider it included. Because that's it right? Inclusion, a shared space, a a shared experience. We're all along for the ride, next to each other, not above.

Though there still is something a teacher should add to this. I don't mean this in in a 'all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others; kind of way.

I'll let Jesse Ball explain.

JESSE BALL

I think that this would be one of the ways in which the teacher is fundamentally a slightly different member of the classroom, because usually I like to think of it as everyone is the same in the classroom. But I mean that really in terms of the confidence that people have in the truth of

what you say. That should be the same for everyone, but you put something forth and it can be questioned the same, whoever says it, whether it's the teacher or any member of the class.

So, in that way, status-wise, everyone is the same. But in fact, the responsibility and obligation of the teacher is greater, because the teacher should be always looking out for the emotional dynamics between the different students. So, if one person is hurt by another student by something that was said, it's not like you have to throw down the hammer or stop everything or whatnot, but just that you perceive that this person is hurt, and then like you can say something which somehow buttresses their confidence, especially in a quite subtle way, where you're not like chiding the person who hurt them or something. Because potentially, people are often hurt in ways that are unreasonable or unfair, since it's based on the like a prior precedent that occurred outside of that classroom.

But if you are really paying attention to everyone and then you notice that someone's hurt, then you can make some kind of a... it's often with tinges of comedy. Like, there's the comedy is the great alleviator. So, there's always ways of like joining in someone else's humiliation to make their burden a little less. And what happens over the course of the semester is that, as you become more and more, like demonstrating gentleness and kindness, and like a joint sensibility, other students will take that up.

So, I rarely have had a class where I'm the only one who's watching out for all the others. And so, then in fact, a class by the end might have 8 teacher types and only 4 sort of student types, because everyone is sort of teaching each other and looking out for one another and being kind.

DENNIS

To refer to our last episode: we have to create a classroom where anyone can become anything. It is the teachers responsibility to create this classroom, be a part of it, and making sure everyone is being included. Being the first defender or guard of that sacred space, in the hopes others will follow suit.

So, it turns out, it is not at all about three act structures, script formatting guidelines or the importance of Deleuze for the modern artist. It's about empathy, mostly.

JOHN VIGNA

Because those other things don't matter. But the acts of kindness, the acts of care to show students that they're supported mean everything more than subject matter, in fact." And this was when I realized this, like I said earlier on, it changed everything. Because I no longer had to feel like I needed to be the so-called expert in the room and sort of keep up with that. Is if I was like a decent human being in the room, then all of my knowledge that I could bring to the classroom through my discipline, the writing, and through as a teacher now provided a space for students to really flourish within themselves. And that's really what I think true learning is, to create a stage of comfort and trust for the students so that they can really aspire to be a better version of themselves that they can't yet see because they haven't had that opportunity or been provided the support with. So, that for me has been the most profound evolution in my teaching.

LORENA BRIEDIS

The idea of love, I think it's fundamental in teaching. Like you truly have to love your students. You truly have to love them in their way to understand what they're trying to do through their writing. Like, that piece of gold that's hidden into the mind, you have to be able to show it to them.

JESSE BALL

It's just you go in, and you attempt to be a person who, to the best of your knowledge, is worth being around, someone who can be like kind and careful with others. And then you try to create an environment with them where altogether, you can learn.

If there was a requirement that the teacher has to have to be remarkable, that shouldn't be to have some kind of like genius pronouncements of one kind or another. Their genius should be in reaching, just reaching the students. So, being able to take the temperature of how the students are feeling and understanding how to lead them along to a place where the learning can take place.

DENNIS

But what will that learning be? In one way, you can never tell. In another, we'll talk about it in the next and final episode of this series, which will be released next week.

Thanks again to all the interviewees for helping me think all this through, for providing their own experiences, their advice and their time. They were, in order of appearance: Jesse Ball, Lorena Briedis and John Vigna.

Teaching Art is a podcast by me, Dennis Gaens, for Studium Generale ArtEZ.

Thank you for listening.

POST CREDIT:

LORENA BRIEDIS

So, that was like a real learning out of that experience of having only 2 students left after the first trimester.

DENNIS

What did you change after that?

LORENA BRIEDIS

I think I related to my Caribbeanness more.

DENNIS

You have to explain.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Well, there is something fabulous about the Caribbean, that it's like the gift of lightness. Like this sense of that everything seems light. And I think that that was my new approach, like resorting to that gift of lightness, of that we're talking about all this, but we're talking about the wound and the sacred and everything, like with the natural... like as natural as we were talking about the weather. Like and maybe surfing the wave in the sense that students won't feel intimidated or afraid by the solemnity of these conversations.

