

**Brian Harper**  
*Teaching Philosophy*

As an artist and educator, I care deeply about the value of an education in the arts. My philosophy of teaching is anchored by a personal goal to be a lifelong learner, consistently improving and evolving my pedagogy through student mentorship, acting as a guide while also being a listener, and leading as a role model in and out of the classroom. In over ten years of teaching at the university level, I have developed a teaching practice focused on pushing my students to become better makers and thinkers. I do this by mentoring their abilities in craft and process and guiding them throughout the identification and pursuit of their motivations as artists.

Throughout my experiences as a ceramics professor, I have learned much about the practice of teaching. One of the most important aspects of teaching I have learned over the years is that each student is unique. Individual students are driven by different means and to different ends; therefore, there is not a “one size fits all” approach that will match all students’ needs. What might work for one student may not work for another – even an approach that worked for a student at the beginning level might not work for that same student as they mature. In light of this, I employ a range of different pedagogical methods and work to better understand the needs of individual students, and employ varying methods at different points in their development.

A prominent component to each of my courses is making sure my students have the encouragement to seek out, and the freedom to bring in, a diversity of influences they have in their lives. No matter where those influences come from, they make up the individuality of each student. Part of my role as the professor is to seek out where those passions are, and give each student the support and confidence to pursue them. I find that students exploring a range of subject matter helps build a supportive and balanced studio community.

From the first day of class, I expect my students to be ambitious and participate in their own learning. Beyond encouraging them to this end, I also include ambition and participation in learning on their grading rubrics. I make this expectation clear, and explain that successful students participate in the process of learning. I will guide them as much as possible, but I expect them to engage in this goal.

Through openness, laughter, support, and conversation, I promote a climate where my students understand they are free to express themselves through their work. One of the most important aspects of my pedagogy is fostering a creative atmosphere that prompts the students to ask questions about their work. I’ve done this by structuring my assignments as conceptual prompts that can be completed in a range of media and varying processes. For example, an assignment from the most recent semester required students to build a still life that describes a trade or skill. In completing the assignment, some students used the potter’s wheel, some made slip-cast porcelain objects, some used found objects and other materials, and others used traditional handbuilding methods. In this environment, my students quickly realize they are free to explore how materials and processes can be merged and that different materials carry with them different connotations.

Technical skill must always be the balancing factor to conceptual knowledge. Without technological knowledge, a student will face barriers to successfully executing their ideas. By embedding the instruction of skills needed within conceptual prompts for assignments, students get excited about the work first, which is then the driver to work through the challenges of learning a new skill. It is part of the student’s

responsibility to employ the techniques that best suit their work, thereby promoting a self-reliance in making important decisions.

I believe that student engagement outside of the classroom is just as valuable as teaching inside the classroom. Whether showing an artist's website or bringing students to exhibitions and visiting artist lectures at other schools, I feel a responsibility as an educator to demonstrate that learning happens in every facet of our life, not just in the classroom. With this in mind, I provide opportunities for student learning through an experimental exhibition space I created in the ceramics program, affectionately called the SpaceLab, off-campus art exhibitions, scheduling and hosting visiting artists, and cultivating the opportunity to engage in course material outside of the classroom through a website I created and manage, call Claybucket.

I believe that it is imperative for today's students to be engaged in online spaces, and I use Claybucket.com, as a resource for students that provides information relevant to the ceramics program at IU Southeast. On the website, students are able to access videos of class demonstrations, powerpoints, readings, the ceramics program manual, and many other resources. The Claybucket has become a place where students always know they can find a glaze recipe, instructions for programming an electric kiln or mixing clay, or information about the SpaceLab. Another resource I built for my students, The SpaceLab, allows me to to teach new and experimental ways of installing artwork. This small exhibition space in the IUS Ceramics program allows students to produce and promote one-week exhibitions. For SpaceLab exhibitions, students are encouraged to try new things and take risks with their work. Often students build collaborative works for the first time or find a new way of working just because they had the space and the opportunity to try something they've never done before.

Building and promoting community is an imperative component to my pedagogy. I strive to connect students to the broader ceramics community by hosting two to three visiting artists each year. Working with a small visiting artist budget, I have been able to bring in over 35 artists from a range of different backgrounds, from potters to performance artists. I maximize student engagement with these artists, often scheduling personal studio visits with them so that a directly one-on-one connection can be made.

From the broader field to the local one, I believe that it is also important for students to see what resources are available in their own region. To this end, I've taken my students on many field trips to regional schools and art centers, including LVL1, a makerspace in Louisville; Ohio University for a series of exhibitions and a symposium called "Material Histories"; a tour of the AMACO factory in Indianapolis; and regional ceramics programs at IU Bloomington, University of Louisville, and the University of Kentucky, among others. As students learn the importance of the local and national ceramics community, they work together to attend the National Council on the Education of Ceramic Art (NCECA) conference. I encourage and help them raise money to attend and each year have had students attend with funding.

In the 21st century, it is imperative that students learn to have a professional presence online. I use my 15 years of experience designing and building websites to guide my students to this goal, initiating them first by requiring all of my advanced students to maintain a weekly blog of their progress in the studio. I catalog the blogs on the Claybucket website so that others in the class can follow along and I integrate their blogging responsibility into my semester scoring rubrics. Weekly blogging gets the students comfortable with process of posting and documenting their work online and is the gateway to a professional online presence.

I bring my professional experiences into the classroom, not just as theory, but as the practical knowledge and skills gained through mentorship and professional practice. Having a strong base of knowledge and

experiences are a good starting point for my philosophy of teaching, however I feel that a willingness to be flexible and let my philosophy evolve is important. My teaching is informed by my personal and professional growth and therefore I strive to be well versed in new developments in the field, to be an ongoing participant in the art community, and actively exhibiting my artwork. Collaborations with other professors and students coupled with an openness to new ideas and concepts fuels my excitement about the medium and inspires me to give these new ideas back to my students. With this evolving knowledge base I can assure my students they are receiving the best possible education I can offer.