

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY—M. ALEXIS PIKE

“Freeway faculty,” that is how many would define me, driving from one college to the other, a routine I’ve been doing for the past ten years. But I am not just an “adjunct” or “freeway faculty”, I’m an educator. It is my responsibility to provide information and inspiration, regardless of the notoriety of the institution, level of the student, or my title as an educator. I am resilient: able to teach a variety of courses and levels. I am demanding: asking students to dedicate themselves to the coursework. I am informed: aware of the technical and ever changing dialogue of photography. I am compassionate: fostering an open discussion between my students and myself. I am adamant: expecting student’s to achieve their potential. I am entertaining: student’s should enjoy coming to class. I teach. I am a great teacher.

I should define “great teacher” so I don’t sound pompous. I had two professors who I learned from their example of what makes a teacher great. One professor complained about teaching classes and was primarily interested in making art. We never had thorough discussions about my work; it was as if her attention was elsewhere and students were a burden. I felt cheated by her lack of enthusiasm for teaching. The other professor I learned from, complained about not having the time to make art but never complained about teaching his students. He gave me a gift—his time and respect. In a sense, his art became his student’s vision. When you are teaching you make an imprint, and you are creating art. I am an artist who educates.

My students are more than just a name and number on the roster; they are unique individuals with different needs I try to address. I’ve been fortunate to have worked with a diverse group of students over the years, ranging from the student just out of high school looking for direction, single parents wanting to further their education, to the retiree looking for inspiration. Students pay for my attention, knowledge and insight and it is my responsibility to give of myself to each of them. As a teacher I invest time in knowing my students in order to provide instruction that best suits the individual. An artist visually expresses their experiences and emotions, and I help my students discover this.

The first assignment I assign is a photo scavenger hunt, students photograph images corresponding to the hunt-list I have tailored to the course materials. As a class, we review the “Photo Hunts” and discuss the work, we begin to know one another; a dialogue is created. This assignment gives students permission to express themselves, leading to a more nurturing environment for the critique of their work. I want my students to have a foundation in the technical and aesthetic aspects of their medium, as well as an appreciation for who they are and how they can draw upon their histories to create a narrative in their art.

“Freeway faculty” has its advantages and disadvantages. The greatest disadvantage I have encountered is not being able to spend more time with my students as they evolve. If I am lucky, I will work with a student for one year. I envision a day when I am able to spend four years encouraging a student’s advancement in creating images; I want to fully participate in their transition from student to artist and be their mentor. I want to give the gift I received; teaching is my gift.