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Collegiate Teaching Studio Based Teaching + Learning

The following is an interview with Lola Brooks, currently working with the University of Georgia in Athens as the Lamar Dodd Chair. She has been an adjunct professor at Rhode Island School of Design since 2007, and University of the Arts in Philadelphia where she taught from 2001-09. Other teaching includes the State University of New York at New Paltz, Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, and the 92nd Street Y in New York City. She graduated from her BFA in Jewelry and Metals from State University of New York at New Paltz.



Lola Brooks *Lola's Hearts Brooches*
Materials Vary

Manuela Jimenez: How did you develop an interest in teaching?

Lola Brooks: I had no idea that I was going to be a teacher when I graduated, but I had an opportunity to give it a try at the Crafts Students League in NYC, and as I was trying to figure out how to support the work I wanted to make I decided to give it a try. I fell in love with working with people in that way immediately. Helping people unlock their creative potential and teaching them how to think critically is an incredible process and one I feel honored to be a part of.

MJ: What is the range of your teaching experience and how did institutions differ from each other?

LB: I have taught in continuing education programs such as the 92nd St Y and the Craft Students League in NYC, crafts camps such as Penland in NC and Haystack in ME, and I have taught at University of the Arts in Philadelphia, State University of New York at New Paltz, RISD, and the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. And every institution has offered something quite different, from the demographic of the students, institutional ideals, departmental structure, curriculum, student expectations, colleagues, studio equipment etc. I think that each experience has shifted my understanding of the process in some way, and the breadth of how I have explored teaching and all of the ways each differs from the other has all been integrated into my approach to working with students. This allows me to shift gears as needed and offers the possibilities of tailoring an individual approach to each student.

MJ: What are your teaching tips you have arrived at: These are really helpful to young, new emerging teachers.

LB: I think the most important thing is that a teacher is passionate about the material they are teaching, and believes in what they are doing, whether it be teaching or making. Students can smell boredom and cynicism a mile away. I think it is important to remember that it should be fun and engaging and challenging, although not always at the same time. I think it is important to be open and share aspects of yourself, your process as an artist, your challenges and especially your successes. I think of myself as a peer in some ways, recognizing that my students will teach me as I am teaching them. This is part of the beauty of the process. I think it is really important, especially when teaching Art, that I am constantly aware of what a privilege it is to be able to facilitate this process in other people.

MJ: How do you balance teaching and your own work?

LB: This is a tough one, because teaching can be all consuming, but it is vitally important because if you are not engaged in a rigorous process of self-inquiry with regard to your own work, it will be difficult to feed the evolution of your teaching and critical thought. I have decided that making my work is inextricable from my teaching, and I have mostly taught adjunct to allow for those two things to have plenty of space to develop in a parallel way.

MJ: How do you assess student work? Do you have a framework for grades?

LB: I assess student work based upon their level of intellectual and creative curiosity, and the questions they are asking of themselves and their work. The depth of the lengths that they will go to in order to answer these challenges, how they are engaged in the conversations we are having about their work, and then their engagement in the broader community of the classroom and their peers, through critique, collaboration etc. The evidence of their inquiry as presented through a fearless approach to making, and the objects it manifests. And their level of engagement with whatever their field of study is in a broader way, whether it be demonstrated by a knowledge of current issues and trends or literal participation in that field. With grads my framework is looser, with undergrads there is a lot more structure in the curriculum so often projects, writing and class participation will be broken down into percentages.

MJ: How do you grade engagement and participation?

LB: I think this is really evident in the way that a student approaches making their work, So I don't generally separate them quite so literally. And I think it really comes down to effort, and how they are working to improve themselves.

MJ: What are tips about getting a teaching job?

LB: I think the most important thing I can say here is that experience is the key. The more you teach the easier this will get. And ANY opportunity to teach is an opportunity for you to expand yourself as a teacher, even if it is teaching a kindergarten class how to make macaroni necklaces. But my teaching experience happened really organically, so I am actually not very experienced with applying for jobs...

MJ: How do you advance individual skill in students?

LB: By working individually with students I think it is possible to help them discover what excites them as an artist, and when a student is engaged and excited about something whether it is a skill or an idea they will push themselves. It is my job to ask the right questions or nudge them into trying things that they may find scary or intimidating. This can require some hand-holding initially but once they have gotten the hang of it that confidence will naturally drive them forward to discover more. It is important to find a balance between challenging a student and helping them find the confidence in what they are doing, even if there much to still be discovered or refined in what they are doing.

MJ: How do you manage student's frustration and lack of motivation?

LB: This is a classic challenge, and can be very challenging. Engaging a student in a conversation where they can speak about whatever blocks may be inhibiting their ability to move forward can be very important. Making art can be very intimidating and this is one area that requires patience and understanding without handing out free passes. As artists I think we have all found ourselves in that position, of being unmotivated or uninspired or even creatively blocked. It is important to have an arsenal of manageable exercises/assignments that you can resource and tailor to individual interests and needs that you can give to a student in this position. This can help create a manageable and supportive structure within which they can continue to struggle and explore. In the end one can really only find the work through making the work. Helping a student break that process down into smaller pieces will often get them through whatever obstacle exists, and help them find their process again.

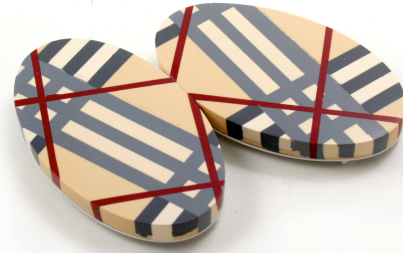
MJ: During critique format what are your tips to generate a healthy and engaging conversation?

LB: I think it is crucial to foster a safe and respectful space for critical discussion. It is important to create some balance between what is successful about a piece and what is not. It is important to recognize when a line of inquiry is not constructive, and to be able to redirect the conversation towards something that is, and to do this in a way that is not judgmental of whoever brought it to that place. It is important to be open-minded to people's ideas and appreciate differing opinions because this is what facilitates lively and engaging critical thinking. If you are having a difficult time knowing what to say about a piece or how to open up the conversation, starting with a formal evaluation of a piece will generally get you past that, and carry the conversation to more important issues. I always try to start with the strength of the work because this will allow an artist to open up and relax a bit, and then I can usually lead them to more critical ground with less likelihood of creating a defensive and therefore unproductive response.

Secondly, I interviewed Tracy Steepy, currently Graduate Coordinator and Associate Professor at RISD's Jewelry + Metalsmithing Department. Her teaching experience includes the University of Oregon and prior SUNY New Paltz. This interview was recorded on Tuesday March 5, 2013.



Tracy Steepy *Plaid Links* Necklace 2009
Silver, Resin, String



Tracy Steepy *Perfect Kiss* Brooch 2009
Silver, Resin, Acrylic Urethane

Analyzing both interviews there are elements in common and two different perspectives that open the spectrum of ways of teaching.

There is an emphasis in how in the graduate education level there is a process of *unlearning* all the preconceived ideas students come with about jewelry, this due to their strategy on how to advance student's knowledge and discovering their own path in terms of making work.

On how the institutions have been different to both professors, the experience has been given from the *practice, practice and more practice*, dealing with the coming challenges regardless if it is teaching a technical class, seminars or a studio practice.

Teaching in different scenarios is important to reflect upon one's self in methodology since each institution or experience informs what kind of educator one wants to be and how it is best that one can contribute for people to grow.

One of the challenges Tracy Steepy identifies for young teachers to experience is being taken as the person that knows everything, in that role of authority and being honest on which are your limitations as a teacher or even coordinator. Resourcing becomes a tool in these cases, having a mentor in order to build your own structures and strategies, when it comes to grading. Clarity is a key factor in these structures to establish an understanding between the student and the teacher. Creating a culture of teaching that is embedded in the program by which the department functions.

Talking from a full time perspective, Steepy describes the differences of part time and full time teaching. There are administrative responsibilities that come with full time teaching and there is a different balance of how your creative muscles are exercised, she describes that teaching is also a way to grow creatively and not solely making work at the bench.

Being part of a student community in a full time scenario of knowledge exchange in comparison of being a full time studio practitioner where the work becomes solitary, it is a decision based on personality and interest.

Teaching undergraduate students and graduate students is a complete different environment, the background grads students have, informs the process they develop from their own voice, in the undergraduate level is more where you do what you have been told.



Tracy Steepy *Folded Oval Neckpiece* 2012
Wood, Resin and Silver



Tracy Steepy *Divided Brooch* 2012
Wood and Steel

Even though both of the professors; Brooks and Steepy, do not have experience teaching internationally, there are certain characteristics that arise from teaching American and international students in the US context. In some cultures, it is challenging to remove the students from the power figure that is attributed to the professor.

Translation is also a way the exchange of ideas becomes different on how people from other cultures understand art.

Language can be a barrier for a student to explode their capacities in full due to the impossibility of having a conversation at a certain level, sometimes the student has extraordinary talent but communication blocks their process because these ideas cannot be exchanged.

Critique culture is cultivated through modeling it first and then students mirror the type of conversations that are encouraged in the field. Understanding that in a critique people are equals and all people are accountable through their own ideas becomes the healthy way in which people engage with it. Especially in the school environment this is meant to be a safe place to discuss ideas addressed by the work.