

TEACHING ART | EPISODE 3: NOTES ON WHAT TO TEACH

JESSE BALL

But with regard to writing, if an essential problem is that people who are quite good at storytelling are already good at it, prior to beginning, educational system like MFW or something like that, then how would you go about improving? And so, I think... improving those people.

Because everyone is naturally so good at it. Like just all human beings are so good at language. It's quite different from like painting or music. Almost no one is very good at painting or music. But speaking, I mean, you can have conversations with nearly any person that you meet, and they can say something shocking and wonderful to you. Which is like, if you could just bump into anyone on the street and they might take out a trumpet and play something like Louis Armstrong, it just doesn't happen. So, for the... the bar is already really like quite high.

That's the thing that is the hardest, and especially in writing.

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 final episode, we finally get to that first question: what is that we teach, when we teach art? And can it be taught at all?

As I've mentioned before, I've been teaching Creative Writing for a little over ten years now. Here's what I know: in the last year of our curriculum, the students work on their graduating work. They get to decide everything about that work themselves. They can choose one of the teachers to guide them. It's essentially sitting next to them, talking about what they made. I really like that phase. I like that the student is in charge. That I am there not too teach, but think alongside with them. I like that it's about the work and about who they are as artists.

The three years before that I am constantly reimagining, shuffling, completely overhauling. I think that what I am trying to do is to make it as much as that last year as possible given the students' age, experience and confidence.

That's the idea. In practice this has meant mostly removing a lot of theory from my classes and focussing on process, the writing process but also the learning process both individually and as a collective.

When I started, I thought I had to teach them the big ideas in writing, the accumulated knowledge about the craft since, here he is again, Aristotle. I taught things like three act structure, which if you don't know it, is an idea about story structure that predominates western storytelling. If you're interested, Google will give you a billion and half search results within 36 seconds.

Which... is exactly the point right? Why should I be teaching something that is so readily available for anyone to learn themselves?

JOHN VIGNA

I'm on board with you here. I mean why go through these things that's Google search term away for many of these people? Yet at the same time, there's a lot of bad information, and it's sort of a distilling of information that we all struggle. With when we go to that route anyways.

DENNIS

True, not all of those billion and a half search results will be good, so one approach would be to present the idea again and maybe make room for some of the ideas that are not so predominant, that the algorithm pushes down to the last 500 results or so .

JOHN VIGNA

But what can we teach in a way that's going to sort of offer them sort of some context? And how can we also sort of bring in some other voices to amplify different story structures across the world, so that everyone can kind of think about these not only from the community they're writing from, but to understand there are many different forms to tell a story?

And so, something else that's proven to be really helpful in this way is, yes, there's 3-act structure. Here are some key concepts about it. But here are some ways that you can kind of now start to either flatten that or look at different sort of models with it, different structures, whether it's a spiral structure, forward with dipping into the wells of the past. There's so many ways you can kind of take a 3-act structure and start to flatten it or twist it around in ways that has so many of those similar pieces in place. And that goes across all models virtually across the world, as like if you have a strong sense of character, does the character kind of move towards something in that?

So, that's kind of where I think that direction can really help a lot is sort of providing that the content that, you're right, a lot of people can get through another thing. And they will often sort of go off on their own and continue to check that. But you're helping them kind of think about it beyond that in a way that's a little more meaningful than just some search terms. It's like, how is this kind of can be applied instead of it just being a rule? And we really try to stay away from rules at all in fiction.

DENNIS

This is John Vigna, author and creative writing teacher in Canada. And I think he has a point here, but still... Some part of me felt that maybe the students don't need to know about three act structure unless they really want to. Who was I to know what was important and what wasn't?

It basically comes down to the problem of hierarchy in the classroom, which we discussed in the last episode.

JOHN VIGNA

How creative writing has always been taught to this point from the inception of the traditional workshop from the 1940s, has always been a top-down approach, usually, White male approach as well. And it's never sort of considered the views of any of the students in there, particularly students of color. And I think now, anyone who doesn't do this is now isolating students one after another. And they're isolating all the students. It's not just the students of the community they represent, it's just basically

all the students. Because students are no longer seeing their interests, their voices reflected in the way that the course is being taught, or the material that's being taught. So, it's vital to, at every point within creating a course, to think about, "How can I continue to sort of decenter my own authority and offer sort of perspectives for students to see themselves reflected in?"

DENNIS

The most obvious answer to that question is, to involve the students somehow in what it is they are being taught.

JOHN VIGNA

"How do we decenter our authority in the classroom?" is one of the things that I hear you saying there. And I think that's something that we're needing to really examine more than ever. And there are different ways to do it with depending on the different audiences. But I'll give you an example of an experiment I have been working with in my graduate class, because it's smaller. It's contained. These are serious writers that are there.

And so, I create a... or try to create a completely flat kind of hierarchy within the course by doing the following. I contact them before the semester begins, send a quick questionnaire to them to find out something about what they're doing, why they're entering this course, whether what they've been reading lately, what their fears are about writing fiction, whether fictions their primary genre, secondary one. What are any readings they would like to see represented in this course this semester? Just like an early point of contact before the semester has even begun. So, and I replied to those before the semester has begun, so that we've already established a one-on-one rapport.

When we come to class for the first time, I've already had some sort of sense of where everyone is at in the room from those pre-course surveys, if you will. And when we come and meet for the first time and they get to see each other, we co-author the syllabus instead of me authoring it entirely. So, we talk about like, "What are some of the topics you would like to learn about in this course this month? Here are some of the things I've seen from your responses here. What are some of the readings you'd like to see

represented?" Well, everyone offers at least 1 reading, so we then take those and we put those into the syllabi now, the syllabus.

And so, without... in a very low-stakes way, they've already kind of started the co-authoring process without knowing it. And they... when they see it happening because they're part of it, that first day is it gives us the chance to sort of reflect more on like, "How are we going to talk about one another's work? What are we going to do here? How are we going to approach closed readings?" And so, it gives another week before I put it into actually... I draft it and then I put it here and they all agree like, "Yes, this is our course this semester." So, now the buy in is already 100% there because we've all co-authored it, instead of it just coming from me.

And so, now part of that sort of co-authoring process is the reading list has been largely determined by them. I bring in my own readings, of course, because there are certain things I know we wish we should look at for voices around certain topics. But they also bring in their own. And what I ask for each class for those students who do that is to... they will facilitate that discussion of that work for about 20 minutes. So, what they'll do is they'll come in, they'll know what the theme is of the week because we've co-created that together as a class. It's, "Dialogue this week. Let's look at dialogue in this Raymond Carver piece," for example. And that's what the focus will... they'll offer a little lesson on that, even though they're not an expert, so-called expert on it, they're much smarter than they think at doing these things. And then we all kind of engage with discussion around that. And then I'll take that information and sort of extrapolate and talk further on it at a deeper level than what we've gone.

So, there's this exchange of ideas that is constant in this class that is a sharing of knowledge, rather than a dissemination of knowledge from one perspective only. And the beautiful thing in doing this is that there's no absenteeism in a course like this, because everyone's fully on board and has co-created it. Everyone's excited to come to class because they're talking about things that they are genuinely interested in, and is seeing represented in the syllabus. And they are also growing according to the topics that they're learning for, that they really wanted to do at the beginning of the course.

And so, there's, I'm finding, I've been experimenting with this for about 2 or 3 years in this semester, of which there's 2 weeks left. I would say this is the most high-functioning class I've experienced at this level now, in which they're all the depth of discussion and work that is being produced on a week-by-week basis is incredibly high. And although it's not successful in the sense that success is determined by being published yet, it's highly successful in the way that they got there and how it's being developed. So, I feel very confident for them beyond the scope of the course that they'll be able to take kind of everything they've learned in co-authoring this experience together, me not being the so-called only expert in the room, we're all experts in which we share knowledge here. So, that's been one really effective way to approach this.

DENNIS

I like the idea of co-authoring the curriculum with students. Not only in the sense that we have now, where students get to choose which courses they pick to kind of tailor the program to their needs. I mean within these classes they pick themselves. Like the example John just gave.

Of course, this a lot easier with graduate students then with first year students. But still I believe it is possible to create a degree of co-authorship on any level.

Co-authorship also means that you still have some input as a teacher. Of course, you still have ideas of what making art means, what makes great writing or even: what is a healthy and productive way to sustain a practice.

In talking to these three authors and teachers, I found that the things they hold onto in their teaching, are very fundamental ideas. And some of the most fundamental things about writing and the writing process are hard to put in words to begin with, let alone to teach in a comprehensive manner. How do you teach the unteachable?

LORENA BRIEDIS

There are like 2 very different tendencies, pedagogically speaking. There is like the most rational. Like formalist tendency, or pedagogical orientation,

which would be like more from the French structuralism. And then on the opposite side, more or less would be the Finnish shamanism headed, I would say, led by Risto Ahti, who is a Finnish poet, our like personal jedi master as we call him. And, of course, I mean, I was job shadowing him for 2 months in Finland. And he has been my personal master of all these years. And he has trained me like as a teacher as well.

So, I would say like, yeah, on coming from this Finnish shamanism has to do with poetics, but also has to do with a certain faith, and the relationship of teaching and creation with the unspeakable as well, and with mystery and with things that cannot be like easily measurable. But on the other side, that can be like very pragmatic. That's why I always speak myself as a pragmatic mystic, in the sense that everything that can be like told about the wound, about the sacred, has like a like very practical dimension when it comes down to our workshops and when it comes down to our texts and the way to approach them.

DENNIS

One of the things in which Lorena Briedis experienced the mystical part of writing is actually a by-product of the teaching itself. She experienced it when she was a student at Escuela Des Escritores herself.

LORENA BRIEDIS (47) - EDITEN

I learned, I think, first of all, like how to deal with crisis.

Yeah, because like I always say that, for me, like the masters in Narrative in Escuela Des Escritores was like a Trojan horse, in the sense I arrived there and I had like a lot of assumptions and beliefs and certainties about the craft of writing, which were absolutely demolished over that process of learning.

So, at some point, I got like very frustrated to the extent that I even consider just to drop it, just to quit, because like I was not finding myself a way through narrative itself. So, well, I decided to keep going. And of course, that crisis process, it took me to a different shore, I would say, where actually poetry and narrative were not opposites, but something that I could like eventually melt into the same pot. So, that probably was

the most I learned of the narrative program, like how do we deal with crisis, how crisis is an inherent part of creativity. That like a real artist must know how to deal with crisis and actually to put himself or herself in crisis into... in order to have like a real poetics. Because like without crisis, without experience of crisis, everything gets like very formulary, like just as a creative writing manual or something like that.

DENNIS

I asked Lorena if, now that she is a teacher herself, she tries to teach in her classes.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Absolutely. Absolutely, because like only through the process of crisis, asking many questions to the text and to the author is the only way you can get into what makes like the magnetic... how can I say? Like, yeah, I don't know how you say that in English.

DENNIS

Try it in Spanish.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Campo magnetico. No, campo gravitacional.

DENNIS

Is it like a gravitational force, like gravity?

LORENA BRIEDIS

Yes, something like that. I mean, I think that crisis is the only way you can actually enhance that gravitational force that would lead you to the wound. And I'm absolutely interested in 2 criterias, which is creative writing, teaching, and of course, writing itself, which is like the idea of the wound and the idea of failure.

DENNIS

You've mentioned the wound before. Talk some more about that. I'm interested. What does the wound mean?

LORENA BRIEDIS

Well, the wound is just like what it hurts when you write, when you create. And, to me, that's like, actually, it has to be with a radical position towards writing, in the sense... radicals in the sense that it goes right into the roots. And the roots of all creative process, well, I would say it's like pain. It's a wound and its joy at the same time. But I think that without contacting that wound. You are not ever able to speak the truth.

I think writing comes from a wound that can be smaller or bigger. Even humor is absolutely pierced by certain sense of like awareness of the human condition, in the sense of in the deepest and dramatic sense. And of course, the degree or the wideness of that would depends if we go on humor or if we go on tragedy or if we go on drama. The gender is quite... it's pretty much conditioned by how big the wound from which we write, yeah, is present there, I would say.

DENNIS

So , the wound is like this metaphor, right? It can mean many different things. It doesn't have to be emotional trauma.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Absolutely. It can be like a social wound, a collective wound. And of course, and there is another fundamental criteria to me. There is like how that wound is alchemy... like the alchemy of the wound from something that it's very individual, subjective, personal, to something that's universal. And that can relate other people.

DENNIS

And that's what you call the alchemy of the wound?

LORENA BRIEDIS

The alchemy of the wound. And to me, creative writing teaching has to do a lot with the alchemy of the wound.

DENNIS

The alchemy of the wound. It's one of those mystical, barely teachable aspects of writing. It comes out of the work itself and for Lorena, that is where you teach it: from the work that students do. From reading it.

LORENA BRIEDIS

I think that when a student reads a text out loud and when that text brings the room back to silence, we know that there is something that is very true in that text, and something that because it's very true, it's enrooted into the wound. And because of that, the text is sacred, in the sense that it speaks out like a very sacred truth that has been alchemized, that has been through the alchemy of language and aesthetics. And that's why it's beautiful.

DENNIS

But how do you teach that, Lorena?

LORENA BRIEDIS

Of course, like you have to put yourself as a teacher in danger, in the sense that you have to read through this student as well. Because... and you have to become a woundist yourself as a teacher. A woundist, you have to specialize yourself a little bit in wounds. And sometimes when I see a text of a student, this student thinks that he's talking about, I don't know, like something that is happening in the zombies, science fictions world in a very like displaced reality, nothing to do with like feelings and like familiar complexes or like marriage failures. And then like, to me, it's obvious that this person is talking about, I don't know, the loss of his father.

So, I think that in that sense, as a teacher, you have the responsibility to point out that into the text, like always relating that wound to the main character or to the character of a story, not to the student, not to the person, not to the author. But you have to somehow find a way to enlighten, where's the real wound there? What really matters of this story? What is really touching the core of a story, and hence the core of any reader?

DENNIS

What for Lorena is the Alchemy of the Wound, for Jesse Ball is finding something you want to say.

In the first episode, he talked about the importance of the classroom being a place where you can try out different ways of being...

JESSE BALL

I think that this is the mode in which you will come closer to like a fundamental notion, which is things that you might want to say, like really might want to say. And this is what distinguishes really great writing from just excellent writing, is that the great writing, a person said a thing that is just specific to them. No one else was really going to say that.

Like, I love, for instance, Robert Walser, because he says all these things that are just no one is going to bother to say that. Anyone could say it, but no one would bother to say it, because it's so small and like a little bit useless and odd. But then it turns out that, of course, it gives great joy. So, trying to write or trying to learn to write with great technical prowess and in some kind of magnificent like post-modern way where you can't really even be judged for what you said, because it's like recursive and like self-bounding and complicated. Like, I think this is much less important than writing in a very plain and simple way, things that you want to say, and then spending most of your time trying to figure out what's worth saying at all.

DENNIS

To get there, students sometimes have to unlearn something about what they they think being an artist means.

JESSE BALL

People sometimes go to MFA because they want to be a writer, rather than because they want to write something. And so, just that simple orientation that you're going to focus on writing something that is really a gift for other people, rather than taking credit for having written something, that makes a big difference.

DENNIS

Wanting to make a gift for other people, that is one of those fundamental notions about writing we're talking about here. And like Lorena, Jesse also found that these fundamental things... you don't teach in a direct manner, you don't lecture on them.

JESSE BALL

One of the most essential things is just to love reading, and to want to make a gift. Those two things are really core. And so, when I began teaching, I was just troubled by the deformation that I thought might be forced on me by becoming a teacher also. Like, to be a person of authority when I myself had always hated authority, I thought, "Why would I want to do this? And if my advice is going to be, 'Just read a lot,' then what's the point?"

So, then instead of that, I thought, "Well, I'll try to create an environment in which we take basic daily things like walking or dreaming or lying and defamiliarize those in such a way that the students at least can be making contact with a different way of being alive. And a way that I think makes life into an ongoing experiment, then to create is just to share the fruits of that experiment with others. I think this can be a very bountiful path.

DENNIS

Defamiliarizing basic things. In *Notes on my Dunce Cap* Jesse presents several of his syllabi. Only one of them is presented as something similar to a creative writing course: writing variations on Grimm fairy tales. The other classes are about dreaming, reading Franz Kafka in different places, Derivé and reciting poetry by other authors.

None of them are about captial C Creative capital W Writing. Still, Jesse wants the students to walk away from the experience of his classes having learned something about writing.

JESSE BALL

Yeah, definitely. I think the main thing would be that curiosity and time, these are the two things that are most important. How you control your time, like not allowing yourself to have your time wasted by others. And being able to use your time to fulfill your curiosity. And then curiosity really flowing out of like the vividness of life, that one should seek, not like

positive experiences that are full of like just full of joy and delight, and not negative experiences that are full of like horror and abasement, but experience, like whichever it is that is vividly felt, like increase of feeling. And out of increase of feeling and curiosity, and then abetted with like level headedness and equanimity, then you can make a life where the continued experiment of being a maker yields like small things that you can share with others as a gift.

DENNIS

You want your students to walk away with something. I think that holds true for all teachers. For me it always has been process, I wanted students to learn their own and unique process. To develop a mindset in which they don't focus on the result of writing, but on the writing itself - as something they can fall back on, at any time.

It is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to John Vigna. In an online workshop he was giving for other creative writing teachers, he said the following...

JOHN VIGNA

Really what it is, is the process. We really need to ourselves love the process and to have our students fall in love with it too.

DENNIS

At the time the workshop was held, I was already working on this series and I got in touch to ask John if he could talk to me on the importance of process...

JOHN VIGNA

So, I'm not a fan of like shortcuts for people to get to easier places other than doing the work. And I think for people to learn that there's a process to especially, writing fiction is a very difficult process. There's a lot... you need to have a process in place that really accepts a growth mindset rather than a fixed one. And that's kind of the area I work at with them now in terms of kind, but rigor as well.

DENNIS

So how do you go about teaching that?

JOHN VIGNA

Teaching the process?

DENNIS

Teaching them... Teaching them to love the process.

JOHN VIGNA

So, we group at the beginning of every class, and we talk about, "What was your process for working this week through this challenge that we had?" And everyone kind of shares and reflects on that. Not only have they shared it with me in written reflections, but now they're talking with one another in around the table here this way. And so, it allows each of them to see there's a wide range of perspectives being offered on different things and tactics they've tried. And no one is encouraged to adopt anyone else's process. But what we're encouraged to do is entertain how any of these other ones might influence our challenge, our own kind of notions of doing things.

And my advice for everyone is like, don't follow one that you think you have to do. Follow one. That works for you. And so, if you take little pieces here and there from different things, great. And if you have your own way of doing things, fantastic. As long as it's like the way that it helps you kind of trust yourself to sit down and do the work that you need to do. And part of that process that they learn as well is the process of letting go of their work and leaving it to rest as well, so that you know the time between drafts, the time between writing is equally as important as the time it is to do the writing too.

And so, this is a difficult point to process that, particularly, the students that are working on book length manuscripts want to do. They want to get a draft done. They want feedback on it. They want to work on it again. And one of the things we do is we interrupt that process by saying, "Listen, you've got 6 weeks here before I get back to you on this. Take some time to do everything else in your life and think about everything you've been learning, but do not look at this manuscript in the meantime. Let the

sleeping genius kind of lie there, lay there a little bit.” That's a Chris Offutt saying. And you get to kind of... they learn to trust this, right? And they come back to their work with renewed vigor and interest.

So, it's really teaching process without teaching process is just the discussion of it constantly. And it's always front of mind with how we're doing things.

DENNIS

What struck me in all of these conversations, is that none of us teach the thing we find most important, in straight forward manner. We're not lecturing on the Alechemy of the Wound, curiosity, time, gifts, processes or mindsets.

JESSE BALL

Well, when you teach, the secret thing about teaching is that you don't get to choose what you teach. Like, you are in a room performing some action that you think will lead to one thing, but meanwhile you're just being observed. So, it's almost as if you're in a scientific experiment, like an ant in an ant farm and people are just watching and writing down notes on you. You don't know what you're teaching, other than that you're teaching an iteration of yourself, propounding something.

DENNIS

In a way, we, the teachers, are the Trojan horses that Lorena mentioned. But in stead of carrying in a bunch of soldiers, we bring ideas and beliefs into the classroom. These ideas take on their own life, shape and applications once they are released.

In *Notes on my Dunce Cap*, Jesse Ball writes the following:

My own path has always been meandering and I rarely learn what I am supposed to at the time I am taught it. At such a time I am busy learning something else. Only later do I circle back. I began teaching with this suspicion, that I was wrong in having the class meet, and wrong in declaring expertise. This being true, I felt, I must do everything in my power to right the initial wrong, and I must make the class as strange, as fascinating, and as

suited to each particular student as I can. If I have ten students in a class, and they all learn the same thing from a lesson, I am dismayed. What I hope for is this: some will drowse by the windowsills doing their own deeds, some will follow after my words, guessing at what I mean, and learning things that are not what I mean, some will will turn my thoughts over with a spade and find still better thoughts, and some will disparage me, sime will disagree out loud. In this melee, different things will be granted to each one, and I myself will be granted things also. I will leave the class with new belongings.

This series is divided into three parts, but the teaching itself can't be separated as easily. What we teach isn't independent from who we are and where we teach it. And when it comes to art, I wonder if we can even talk about teaching. If we really are teachers...

JOHN VIGNA

Yeah. No, it's a great question, right? I think it's we're refining our... I've refined my role as a teacher as being more a coach. And so, coaches hold you to a high standard. They still instruct. They know when to instruct, when to step in and interrupt to instruct. This is constant in a coaching sort of way. And it's not really a lot different in the classroom, from my perspective. It's also seeing them more as human beings, instead of students of which I have more knowledge than them.

DENNIS

If we see ourselves as facilitators more than as teachers, we will come a long way in connecting where we teach with how we teach and what we teach. Though it is definitely not an easy thing.

JOHN VIGNA

Well, this is the difference in teaching in this day and age now, for those of us that do this, Dennis... It does require incredible reserves of energy and work to do, instead of just sitting back as it used to be and letting everyone kind of grapple with it, right?

DENNIS

But as Jesse Ball pointed out to me...

JESSE BALL

They say like with a... there's no point in walking a tightrope that is laid across the ground.

DENNIS

This has been *Teaching Art*, a series about well... teaching art. Or rather facilitating learning art. Anyway... I want to take the time here to thank my interviewees again. They were: Joanne Dijmkman, John Vigna, Jesse Ball & Lorena Briedis. I would have not been able to make this series without them. Not only did they help me think things through, I have learned a whole lot of new stuff talking to them.

A lot of which, by the way, ended up on the cutting room floor. There is so much left out of these conversations because they didn't fit in the series in a comprehensible way right now. Ideas about how to deal with students need for validation of their work, about grading, about how to teach rigor add concrete examples of how to apply ideas talked about in this show.

I am thinking of developing some kind of workshop on these ideas to accompany this series. If you are interested or have any input on it, please get in touch with me through the link in the shownotes.

I also want to thank Studium Generale for making it possible for me to work on this series and especially Joke Alkema and Catelijne De Muinck. Not only were they very patient in waiting on me to finish this series, their input and tips were invaluable in the process.

I also want to mention that the amazing artwork for this series has been made by Corine van der Wal.

Teaching Art has been a podcast series by me, Dennis Gaens, for Studium Generale ArteZ.

Thank you for listening.