

Theatrical design requires a person to contemplate their aesthetic choices on both a large-scale cumulative level and a practical detail-oriented one. I strive to help students develop these skills through empathy-based text/character analysis, culturally informed instruction, collaborative critique, clear communication practices and technical training. These methods culminate in a nurturing, individually focused educational environment in which students can find empowerment through design.

In costuming, it is critical to think about each character and how their personality and beliefs impact their physical appearance. Designs are made or broken in their details. After an in-depth analysis of a play's worldbuilding in the style of Elinor Fuchs, I find it beneficial to think from a character's perspective in dressing themselves. Applying an empathetic approach can help students gain insight into what their design choices say about a character and about the world of the story at large.

By demonstrating empathy in my teaching style through culturally responsive practices and individual focused learning, I provide the framework for students to apply these same techniques to their design work. The life experiences that we have shape us and how we interact with the world, the classroom is not a cultural vacuum and neither is the stage.

Through this practice I also create a nurturing educational environment where students engage with the materials and technical challenges without a fear of judgement. Students who are unburdened by concern over how they might be negatively perceived are more likely to ask questions and overcome misunderstanding. By acknowledging and disputing the unspoken social rules which prize competition, and link productivity to worth I create a more open classroom and encourage my students to think critically about how their feelings and behavior are influenced by the culture of their environment.

Pressure to perform to an abstract ideal can immobilize or disengage students, so I give clear, concise learning outcomes which focus on individual growth as well as absolute achievement. I seek to instill the importance of communicative skill in my classroom and in group critique. This provides the opportunity for students to work towards successfully expressing their design decisions.

Another tool which can aid students in communicating their ideas is instruction in the technical aspects of theatre. The reason I incorporate technical skills training into my design instruction is twofold. Firstly, technical skills are valuable; the ability to do simple things like sew on a button or patch a hole in drywall have worth even outside of a theatrical context. Secondly, the ability to understand the way a design functions on stage and convey that through drafting is crucial to successful theatrical production. Thinking technically focuses a designer on the minutia in their technical drawings while also encouraging them to think about how independent pieces interact as part of the whole.

In the introductory costume course I teach at MSU the final project is a reversible tote bag and every semester the day comes where the students attach the lining to its outer shell. This is always my favorite class because when the students flip their bags right-side out they have this revelatory Ah Ha moment. For the first time the project looks like a bag and not like a confusing jumble of cut out pattern pieces. They feel accomplished and excited, through hard work and time they have made something new, something greater than its individual parts. This is the aspect of theatre and design that has always thrilled me, the ability to create so much from so little. Through design we can take an idea and make it a reality, or some fabric and make it a tote bag. Design allows us to manifest our individual and collective power through the act of creation. I love collaborating and Ah-ha moments, but what I love most about teaching is the opportunity to equip students with the tools they need to empower themselves.