

# Teaching for the Working Artist— Planning for Success

by Milon Townsend



As an artist, you have probably found yourself in a position at some point in your career where you would like to share the love of your medium and what you have learned along the way with other artists. What you're going to teach—and who you're going to offer it to—are decisions that you need to make even before beginning to promote and fill your class. There are many issues for you to consider as you make plans for the class, one of the most important of which is skill level. A related issue is how you want to segment the information you have to offer—on a day-by-day basis within a given class as well as from class to class.

One effective method for ensuring ongoing success in filling classes is to structure them so that students need to have attended the 101 level—with you—before they're qualified to come to the 201 level of the same technique. You'll also experience the significant benefit of establishing long-term relationships with these repeating students, which is an increase in the quality of your own life as much as anything else.

## Important Considerations

As you are designing and developing classes that you would like to teach, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you want to teach beginning, intermediate, or advanced students? What pool is the host organization drawing from? How do you qualify the attendees?
- Are you comfortable providing the rudimentary, basic skills that are the essential building blocks to excellence, or would you rather explore and illustrate refinements of technique?
- What is it that you hope for students to achieve?
- To what extent do you want to explore the underlying thought and philosophy of seeing, of working, of living as an artist? This can be one of the more valuable components of your teaching and your classes, and it will benefit from your having consciously decided to pursue this so that you can prepare and be ready to go with it when it comes up.
- Do you want to develop a series that the same students can grow through, or do you want to continue to teach the very same thing to continually new groups of students?
- How are you going to structure your curricula to accommodate these different approaches?

## Determining Class Structure and Purpose

Short classes are well suited to advanced students who can gain the most from instructor demonstrations. You can cover a huge amount of ground this way if your students have the foundational skills to understand it by simply watching you do it. Longer classes, on the other hand, are well suited to lots of hands-on practice for students. This works well for beginners who need to get a sense of how to handle the tools and materials. That said, you will need to identify a process by which you or your host organization can sort prospective students by skill level. The easiest way is just to include a qualifier in the class description such as: "No prior experience necessary"; "Intermediate skill level"; "Minimum one year experience required"; or "Submit slides and resume with class application."

It will be helpful to spend a little time talking with your contact person at the host site to get a sense of who they are attracting as students. Is it directly from their preexisting student body? Is it from art groups in the greater area? Does your host have a national identity and promotional outreach? These are important to match with what you are qualified to teach and are choosing to offer.

Your host will also have a very good sense of what length of class works best for them. It's pretty hard to fill five-day classes that are not during summer or winter breaks that run straight through a work week. Students usually have jobs, and they're not only paying to attend the class with you, but they're also losing the income they might have been producing if they spent the week working instead. If you can plan your class so that it includes a weekend and only two or three working days, you might be able to find more students who can make it.

## Marketing Matters

Selecting a title for your class can make a big difference in attracting students. A title such as "Exploring Pathways to Creativity Through Flameworking" versus "Introduction to Basic Skills in Flameworking," for example, gives a different sense of focus and may attract a different set of students. Some titles are so off the wall that they no longer make any specific reference to the actual

topic and don't work for me. Realize, however, that given current economic woes, more and more artists are turning to teaching as a significant supplemental income source, and the pool of potential students is not expanding as quickly as the pool of artists who think themselves qualified to offer classes. Competition for students exists, and if the name of the class—or your name attached to your class—will help to fill it, then by all means do so!

You would do well to be sure that your students are as much of a similar skill level as possible. It can be challenging and distracting to try to help a novice keep up with more advanced artists. This usually irritates the more accomplished students and frustrates the beginner, not to mention dividing your own time and focus.



## Providing Student Aids

When working with first timers, lay it out on paper for them. People tend to get confused when being introduced to a mass of new information, especially in the compressed, condensed context of a short-format classroom. If you make the effort to put it on paper, your students will have something other than your spoken words to refer to, a way for them to retrieve their place in the discussion. We, as teachers, need to remind ourselves that the concepts and processes that we've lived and breathed and worked with all day every day seem as routine and predictable as the sun rising and setting. But for the newest practitioners of our art form, it can be as completely bewildering as learning a new language—which in some cases is literally true.

Consider providing the following when designing your handouts for the class:

- An introductory overview of the process
- A glossary of terminology so that you can all be speaking the same language when referring to tools, materials, and processes
- What steps you'll be taking them through
- Process sequence images, either drawn or photographed
- Ample blank spaces for them to take their own notes
- A list of any formulas, tables, or ratios that are used, as well as a worksheet illustrating clearly how to use them
- Resources where they can obtain tools or materials needed for the process

My typical class handout averages ten to twenty pages. You'll find that the very process of planning and laying out something in an orderly, written form will be of great assistance to you in planning the class, as well as being a massive additional benefit to your students. You can certainly deviate from the order or add new things during the class that are not included in the materials that you hand out. As the fortune cookie at dinner last night said, "It's not the plan, it's the planning." How true.

In addition to the handouts that I've prepared for the specific class, I have PowerPoint presentations relative to the class on my laptop and flash drive. I generally offer additional information during lunch or dinner breaks, which gives the opportunity to cover subjects that we wouldn't be able to physically do within the confines of the typical class structure. We also hold discussions on creativity and marketing of artwork, areas that are of avid interest to most working artists. These peripheral discussions will often provide some of the highest points of the class experience for your students, and you'll learn from them as well.

## Preclass Preparation

I'm a big believer in making the most of time spent traveling, since the investment in time and money to get there has already been made. You might want to touch base with your host to see if some opportunities for demonstrations, lectures, or discussions might be available for you to reach out to the larger community in the area.

If you need students to bring tools, materials or equipment, you need to be able to communicate that to them. Send an e-mail and include important details. If they're going to be limited to making objects of a certain size, if there is a detail from the class description that you want to clarify, or if you just want to touch base to make it clear that you're available for Q&A prior to the class, then mention those things.

Sometimes you'll need to put together kits of materials for your students to use in the classroom setting, and you need to plan some time to sit down and do that in an organized manner. You might also need to prepare some physical objects that illustrate principles and practices of the process that you're presenting, and you need to make time to prepare those as well. Often this type of preparation will make the difference between an okay class and an excellent one.

As for any kits that are provided to the students, you will also need to plan ahead for those and put a fair value on them. You don't want to make a killing, but you need to figure in some compensation for the time and effort that it takes to plan and assemble the elements in the kit. Some classes include them in the fee, and some list them as a separate item. You need to decide how to handle them.

You may need to illustrate ideas on a whiteboard or a flip pad, so you need to make sure that your host has those items available or that you bring your own. I always bring my own dry-erase markers, since you can never be sure how much use someone else's have seen, and it's very unprofessional to try to write on a whiteboard with markers that you can't read.

Be sure to spend the time that is required to thoroughly prepare to share your techniques and your art with others who are willing and eager to learn. Through this type of planning and preparation for your class, you'll find that when your students walk through the door, you're more than ready to welcome them and begin your journey of exploration together.

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