

Teaching for the Independent Artist— Working with Teaching Assistants and Students

by Milon Townsend

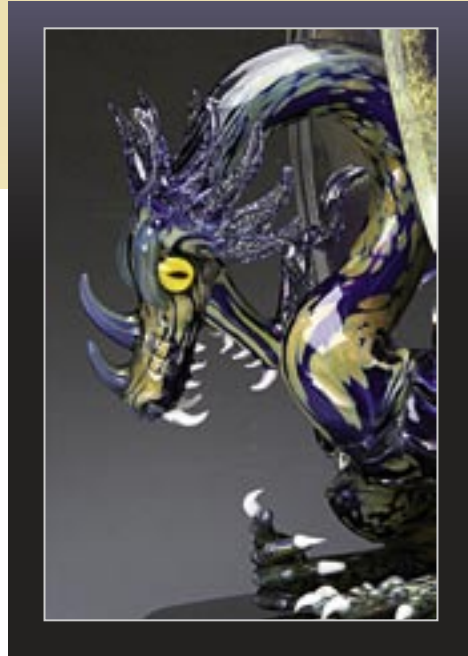
One of the most important aspects of teaching is maintaining constant communication with students. Having a good teaching assistant, or TA, will help you provide more one-on-one contact to those attending and make a great difference in the success of your class. It is usual to have TAs who are conversant with your discipline so they can be of real assistance in working with the students, helping them to pick up on the techniques or principles the teacher is presenting. The TA should be a local person who knows the facility inside and out and should be able to get things done for the class—everything from food, electricity and water to tools, materials, copying, or anything else that might come up that you need and don't know where to find.

Benefits of Working with a Teaching Assistant

TA positions are often awarded as a plum to local artists, allowing them to work closely with visiting instructors. While it is almost always an unpaid position, the benefit of working directly and personally with a visiting artist is a big one and should be valued accordingly. I usually know someone with whom I've worked before in the area where I'm teaching and will offer him or her the job. If the TA is from out of town as well, the host will typically pick up the expenses for room, board, and transportation. Sometimes the hosting organization wants the ability to give out the position of TA as a reward to one of their members, so check with them to see what their approach is before you make any commitments to one of your own people.

The close working relationship you have with your TA will often lead to ongoing activities as an intern, apprentice, or a TA in other classes. If there's any way that you can meet in advance of the class with a prospective TA whom you don't already know personally, you'll find it effort well spent. You don't want to be in a situation where you have to spend a week working closely with someone who doesn't mesh well with your own style, principles, or values.

Have a private conversation with your TA to lay out the ground rules before the class starts. This can help to prevent any awkward moments that could seriously impinge on the good feeling and momentum that naturally occur as you develop a rapport with your students. Your TA should never, ever contradict something that you've given as direction in front of the class. He or she must defer to you, at least publicly. You can iron out any differences in private, but students can only learn from one teacher at a time, especially if there are differences in approach, theory, philosophy, or practice.



Learning to Deal with Different Personalities

Getting your students to show you some of their work at the beginning of the class will help you to determine the skill and personality of each one. This will be a big assist in helping you decide on the tone that you want to set. It will also allow the entire class to learn from each other and allow you to observe the way in which the students present themselves and their work. Some of the personality types that you will encounter include:

- **Talkative students.** It's great to have students who are highly interactive, but you will sometimes find several that outtalk all of the rest combined. Just be sure to not let the talkers dominate or monopolize the time to the detriment of the others.
- **Quiet students.** You'll develop an internal indicator to tell you when you've been spending too much time on one student and not enough on another. Be sure to check in with all of them regularly, especially the quiet ones. They need just as much of your attention—perhaps more—and may struggle to be able to ask you for your guidance.
- **The constant questioner.** If the questions serve to illustrate important points from which the entire class can benefit, you're lucky to have this student to keep the conversational ball rolling. If, however, it seems to be more of an attention-getting mechanism than actually searching for relevant information, you'll have to figure out a way to handle it so that it doesn't drive you to distraction and make it hard for the rest of the class to get what they came for. Your patiently answering every question should fulfill any need for information sooner or later. If this doesn't work, I find that sometimes turning the question back on the questioner requires him or her to give actual thought to the issue at hand. They'll often

be able to figure it out for themselves if made to do so.

- **Late students.** This can be a real problem. I don't want to say everything twice just because someone came in late, and I also don't want anyone to miss something important. I'll often have a presentation at the beginning of the day that sets up the entire day, so it's important for everyone to be able to hear it. Talk to students who are chronically late and see what can be done to make it not so. I have a stock of PowerPoint presentations that I can run through if the entire class needs to wait for someone to arrive before a critical demonstration of a key technique.
- **Highly overqualified students who know almost as much as you do.** I try to find out something about everyone in the class, preferably before the class begins. I will sometimes find students who seem very skilled at exactly what we're going to be covering in the class, and I make a point to ask what it is that they hope to gain. I don't want them to be wasting their time and money, and I don't want students who are going to be telling me or the other students something different than what I am trying to share. Usually these experienced artisans are looking to expand their own knowledge base and are seeking to find any little thing that will complement what they're already doing.

Maintaining Control of the Classroom

In a recent class, one of my students had a great deal of skill in a very closely related area. I was very tired and borderline sick one morning, and it happened that it was the same day that the student brought in an amazing selection of objects that he had brought from the shop where he worked. I asked him to take the class for the morning, and we all learned a great deal over the next hour and a half. I was completely present and interacted consistently during his presentation, retaining my position as teacher, enabling us all to benefit from the great deal of bonus information he provided. This is a slightly delicate dance, although well worth the effort. It takes a confidence in your mastery to be able to learn from others in your own teaching venue.

Religion and politics are topics that lead more often to fission than fusion, and I generally request that they stay out of the classroom. I'm careful not to be overt in my own views, although the thoughtful observer could certainly determine them, given the careful use of inductive reasoning. I find that once labels are applied, we fail to hear what the other person is saying. If we can focus on the actual principles behind the labels, we find that there's a great deal more that we agree on than otherwise.

The Importance of Student Evaluations

Check in with all of your students periodically, at least once a day. Specifically ask them if they're getting what they intended from the class and if there are any issues that you're leaving unaddressed. Think of servers in the restaurant and the way that they come back at least once to check to be sure that everything's all right.

Evaluations are a critical component of every class. If your host does not provide them, take the time to put something together yourself. You need to know how well you're communicating with your students and if there is an overarching pattern that is a problem. You'll never be able to please all of the students all of the time. While you need to be able to identify issues that are the problem of the student more than you as a teacher, you also need to take input seriously. If there's a general consensus that your handouts need page numbers, do it. If they need diagrams, charts, or work sheets, put them together. If you move the laser pointer too quickly on the PowerPoint slides, slow it down. If your joking around really offends your students, tone it down.

The evaluations are in many ways the treasure, the evidence of your effectiveness as a teacher. Take them seriously, always striving to grow and improve. You'll need to recognize the difference between specific commentary on things that you need to address and a personality type that is just looking to find things with which to disagree. Hopefully you won't be saddled with too many of this type, but it does occur. The only time that I've felt I failed to reach a student or that there was a significant problem was when I didn't check in often enough with each person. Communication is the key.

In the next issue, we'll take a look at the dynamics of the ongoing relationships that are engendered in the context of classes that you teach.

PGQ

© Copyright 2009 by Profitable Glass Quarterly.
All rights reserved.

You'll find this and many more informative articles on how to expand your glass art horizons in the Winter 2009 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.

Milon is a frequent speaker on art and marketing at workshops and conferences. You can visit www.milontownsend.com to view his artwork. He also produces educational materials that are available on the Internet at www.thebluemoonpress.com. Milon can be reached on his studio phone at (585) 392-6476.