

PERTH ART GROUP

Teaching Art: How I Teach My Classes

Students who are Beginners

For Drawing students there is a set plan of lessons, as outlined at the Perth Art Group web site, where I set specific projects and subject matter. For returning Drawing students, I can continue setting lessons and projects, or students can work on their own projects, and the their own subject matter. Many Drawing students move onto Painting, or Pastel Drawing, after a term or two of Drawing.

For Painting students, I start with a colour mixing exercise, and then we proceed to do a painting of the subject matter determined by the student. Then I work through the project with the student, and deal with the project step by step, and as issues arise.

Returning Painting students can continue working on their own projects, or I can set specific exercises and a course of study, by arrangement with the student.

Set Exercises vs Student Self-Initiated Projects

If a formal art course at TAFE or a University, students are required to complete set exercises and projects, in order to get their qualifications. The classes taught at the Perth Art Group are informal, and students are not required to do anything in particular. Most returning Painting students choose to continue to work on their own projects on an ongoing basis, rather than with any lesson plans set by the lecturer. Students doing more formal art courses, also usually work on their own self-initiated projects, while at art school, but concurrently with projects set by their lecturers.

When students are working on their own projects, it is not the same as a set lesson given by the lecturer. A set lesson has particular specific goals, and it is easy to decide if the project is a success in relation to those particular goals. When students work on their own projects, in practice what happens is that the lecturer gives advice, if it appears necessary, and answers any students specific questions as they are working through their project. If the picture is developing well, there is actually nothing left for the lecturer to do, but to let the student keep on working. In fact, many experienced students don't want the lecturer standing over their shoulder, as they often actually know what they need to do next, and don't need, or want, another person to unnecessarily intrude.

Assessment

When a lecturer has set a project, it is not difficult to assess and guide the student as they go along, according to the goals of the project. For a student's own project, assessment can be made by the lecturer, as the student progresses on their project. However, often assessments can be quite subjective, as judgments are often made on an artistic basis. In fact, different lecturers can have different assessments of the same picture. Because of this, assessment and opinions given by the class as a whole, are helpful, and this is why many students like to come to a regular group.

Art

A lecturer can help a student draw something in proportion, or help a student mix a particular colour, but a lecturer can't teach a student to make a picture of artistic merit. Art cannot be taught, as it is not something that you can measure with a ruler or a device. The making of art is something that can happen while a person is making a picture, but it doesn't always happen. Whatever it is that makes a great song, for example, is something that comes from inside the songwriter. No one "taught" Paul McCartney how to write "Yesterday", for example. There are plenty of songs that are competently written, but lack artistic merit. An art teacher can help you draw a picture, but there is no particular instruction that they can give you to make it artistic. There is no secret formula to making art.

The lecturer can make suggestions, but a different lecturer may make very different suggestions.

Style

In an art class where every student is drawing or painting the same subject matter in front of them, the first thing an observer notices, is that each picture is different. This happens, even if the teacher tries to get everyone do depict the subject as realistically as possible.

This phenomenon, ultimately, is actually what makes looking at pictures, and art, interesting. Also, this phenomenon, is something that "just happens".

The best analogy to this situation, is to look at different people's written signatures. The differences in those signatures is something that "just happens" over time, and is not taught.

Those differences, are what one could call differences in style.

The skill in teaching painting and drawing, is to instruct the student as much as possible, but not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" so as to crush the student's individuality and style.

This is why, to some extent, after giving some instruction and advice, the teacher has to leave students to "get on with it", and "just have a go". That is, a lot of the learning happens through playing about, and trial and error. Then the teacher looks at what has happened (at various stages), and points out if it is progressing well, or if something may have gone wrong, in their opinion.

I say to Drawing students "You have to put the wrong line down first, in order to find out where the right line is" and to Painting students "You have to put the wrong colour down, to work out the colour that you really want". Of course, I can show a student how to mix a particular colour, but the colour that might look best, artistically, in a painting next to other colours, may need to be found by trying various alternatives, and seeing what looks best. In the same way that a songwriter tries various chords, to see what sounds best, and in the same way a writer writes and rewrites lines, to find the one that reads and sounds right. This is a process that a teacher cannot do for the student. The student has to do it themselves, and then make their own decisions on the result.

How to Do It

There isn't a correct way to paint and draw, as there isn't one correct style. A teacher can teach a student "How to do it", specifically, only in relation to a particular style. For example, a teacher could try a lesson where the student tries to paint in the style of Vincent Van Gough.

To some extent, even then, we often still have to take a guess as how an artist created a particular picture. That is, the very specific particular steps. Painting conservators, often have to do X-rays of a painting, to try to guess how a particular painting evolved.

Over time, and through trial and error, artists work out their own particular way of going about things, that suits their temperament. There are no rules, and the only rules are technical ones, relating to using correct materials, if one wants to create pictures that are archival and last a long time.

Set Exercises

When I was at art school, and also when I studied lessons from books, I did exercises that did not necessarily involve actually making a picture that one can hang on a wall. The colour mixing exercise that I set Painting students in their first lesson, is an example of such an exercise.

With Drawing students, who want to continue after the first term, and who want me to set them projects/exercises, there are many different lessons that I can set, on an ongoing basis.

In practice, I have found that Painting students in my classes want to work on their own projects, and don't ask me to set them to set any further exercises, once they have finished their first colour mixing exercise. And in practice, most Drawing students want to work on their own projects, or ideas, after a term or two of Drawing, or move onto Painting or Pastel Drawing. In the long run, students can learn by set exercises, or by just doing their own projects. Neither method is necessarily superior, as both approaches are valid.