

The Rules of Engagement
by Michael DePalma

Three instructors at Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC) with real world experience in their subjects are doing their best to connect with busy students and keep them engaged in their lessons.

Today's college student may work several hours a week to pay tuition. He or she may have children to tend, errands to run, or appointments to keep.

Once they're in class, students can be distracted by these other commitments. So when a teacher goes that extra mile to involve students and keep their interest, the students notice.

For Robin A. Purvis, 53, teaching has been a way for her to share a knowledge of journalism spanning many decades. Students in her "Fundamentals of Reporting" class are exposed to a variety of methods of instruction, which are designed to recreate the demands placed upon a real world reporter.

Purvis recalls a boring professor from her college days in saying, "He...basically just read from the book." Maybe that's why students in her class face not only readings from the text, but current events discussions, in-class editing exercises, videos and guest speakers.

"What I did in grad school really serves as a model for what I do now," Purvis says. That approach includes generating a portfolio that students can use when seeking a reporting job.

"I needed some writing to show I can do this. This is something I enjoy," comments Zane Clark, a student in Purvis' class. Should he see the semester through, Clark would have at least six pieces to present to a prospective editor.

Purvis knows a little something about approaching editors, having been published in six newspapers, including The Denver Post. Her work has also appeared in four regional magazines, but she doesn't believe her real world experience alone influences her students' perception of her.

"I'd like to hope it gives me more credibility in the students' eyes. I don't know that this is necessarily true," she ponders.

Clark would disagree with her. For him, an instructor's criticism, having been accomplished in the real world, can have more value than “teachers that end up there [in school] because there's no job for them.”

That criticism is given with a genuine enthusiasm for helping others. Purvis muses, “I find it exciting to think I could have an influence on somebody's career.”

What advice would Purvis give future reporters? She counsels, “Be as accurate as possible, be as fair as possible, and be willing to learn something new every time you go out on an assignment.”

She cites one of her own strengths in suggesting an additional requisite: organization. “Students who are organized stand out,” Purvis insists.

When Danen Jobe, 39, left his high school years behind him, he was anything but organized. He struggled in a punk band, eventually leaving home. He tried college, and is quick to point out he managed to get an 'A' in acting.

Jobe then spent a year on the road with his then girlfriend, had everything stolen from the car that was their mobile home, and found his way back to his native Arkansas.

“That's actually one of the reasons I love teaching at a community college. You see people dealing with this,” he says. Jobe wants to assist students who may be in transitional periods in their lives.

His life in order now, Jobe holds a faculty position in the English department of PPCC. He has taught courses in English Literature, English Composition, Creative Writing, Technical Writing and everything in between.

Childhood years spent reading are evident in talking with Jobe. He has a wealth of knowledge on a variety of topics, and his students notice.

Allison Raposo is a 28-year-old student who has had classes in Creative Writing and Technical Writing with Jobe. “I just admire him because he's knowledgeable and experienced,” she says, adding, “He doesn't need a book to teach.”

Jobe is no stranger to texts. He has written two books, one of which, “Niagara Blues,” was published in 2006. His first play was performed when he was 17.

When asked if his history as a published author means students treat him differently in writing classes, Jobe is quick to reply, “Yes, and I don't like it.”

This seems strange at first, considering how much effort he puts into helping students. Then he shares an important element of creative writing courses.

Helping people means you have to criticize, Jobe explains. Students excited about his published history, however, are looking for two things. They want help being published, which is no easy task, or as he puts it, “They want a pat on the back.”

Jobe prefers to be supportive in other ways. He is available outside of class, prompt in returning emails to students, and keeps things interesting inside the classroom. His energetic style is appreciated.

“I've had teachers that just go off slides, and it's like 'Oh God, I could do this at home,’” laments Raposo. An independently-employed working mother of one excitable toddler, she is no stranger to the idea of being distracted in class.

When her mind wanders, Raposo likens the role of the instructor to that of a fisherman. “He has to keep reeling me in,” she jokes.

Jobe would perhaps prefer to be viewed as a guide. “Sometimes, teaching is about putting people on the right path,” he asserts.

Laura Ben Amots, 47, has always been on an artistic path. “I have always been a working professional exhibiting studio artist, from a family of artist educators, and feel that teaching is, in a way, a family legacy,” she notes.

Ben Amots carries that sense of family in contributing to the local community of student and professional artists. “I believe very strongly in the family of humanity, and the concept of community,” she professes.

She provides written recommendations for students proceeding on their own paths, and connects students to internships and apprenticeships. Ben Amots is constantly networking, or helping students with their own exhibits. This is not surprising for someone in the visual communicative arts.

“First and foremost, an exhibit is an opportunity to communicate,” she notes.

Ben Amots' work is exhibited an average three shows a year. Besides holding a full time faculty position, she runs the art gallery located in the Downtown Studio campus of PPCC. Student and local talent are displayed there.

“The gallery itself is a big deal, because you can actually walk in. It gives me ideas and directions to go with some of my work,” reveals Rachel Westfall, a 24-year-old art student.

Ben Amots is just as involved inside the classroom. “I feel that I have a unique gift to give the students because of my European style training,” she states. That background was earned studying at such institutions as The Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts and University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Students in Ben Amots' painting classes are shown material in many ways, whether through relevant articles, gallery talks or demonstrations. Along the way, she maintains her trademark enthusiasm and positive attitude, while keeping things light.

Ben Amots does not take it easy on students, however. She recalls instructors in her past that drove her to learn and succeed, and she is no less demanding of her students. This is sometimes interpreted as 'being rushed' by her students, but Ben Amots is just excited to see them progress.

“I always know that the next painting a student is going to paint is going to be better,” she confesses.

Despite the demanding pace of the classes and the sense of humor, or perhaps because of it, students respond in kind. “I think she's genuine,” notes Mike Couillard, 53.

Couillard was assisted by another standard of Ben Amots' ardor, which is being available for extra help outside normal class hours. While working on a project in the Summer 2009 semester, Ben Amots spent additional time aiding Couillard, a self-professed 'slow' painter. The results were rewarding.

“She pushed me to do something I couldn't have done on my own,” Couillard acknowledges.

The experience likely also pushed him further along his dream of becoming a professional artist. Ben Amots' background and knowledge provide extra incentive

to students hoping to pursue art as a career.

“I'd never painted before, so it was pretty cool...to feel I probably had something there,” he confirms.

Ben Amots laments the challenges that today's art students face. The cost of art supplies, coupled with a lack of government funding for education and the arts, paints a grim picture indeed for aspiring visual communicators.

“When you look back at history, civilizations are judged on two things: their art, and their education of the populace,” she warns.

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