**Reflective Teaching Portfolio**

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**Background**

I was hired to teach as a non-classroom faculty member at the Career & Internship Center at Fashion Institute of Technology in April 2008. This position does not encompass traditional “teaching” in a classroom setting, but rather, one-on-one interaction with students, with the objective of helping them understand and navigate the process of obtaining a college-credit bearing internship.

Internships are very important at FIT and in the wider world as a means for students to gain hands-on workplace experience. Some majors at FIT require internships as a requirement for graduation, while those that do not, generally encourage students to gain as much industry experience as possible via internships.

Because of my extensive background in journalism, editorial and feature writing, and because I lived and worked in Europe for many years, I was assigned primarily to work with students in the International Trade & Marketing for the Fashion Industries major. This is a baccalaureate level program, so most of its students, who typically follow career paths in either trade (imports/exports, logistics, sourcing) or marketing (global communications, social media, interactive marketing), have already earned associate’s and/or bachelor’s degrees.

I advise them on identifying appropriate internship prospects, preparing resumes and cover letters, interviewing and post-interview etiquette, following up on leads, and researching the job market. Each semester I handle a caseload of about 70 students, of which approximately one-third are international.

**Teaching Philosophy**

Though I had worked in publishing for over 20 years, my only formal teaching experience prior to arriving at FIT was teaching yoga. Teaching yoga requires a similar skillset to teaching in an academic setting: thorough knowledge of the discipline, excellent communication and listening skills, sensitivity to students’ needs, and open-mindedness to new and more effective ways of disseminating knowledge. Philosophically, as a teacher at FIT,I believe my job is to enhance my students’ mastery of the content being taught, develop sound methods for achieving their goals, gain confidence and take risks, and, hopefully, generate a sense of enthusiasm and curiosity about the subject being taught. My philosophy requires me to stay current with  best practices in the field, and to familiarize myself with the work of other educators -- such as those who have spoken to us during the course of the NEA project. “It takes a village,” as Hillary Clinton said, to provide opportunities, education and encouragement to grow within a community.

**Benefits and Challenges of Having Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students**

Working with international students required a steep learning curve for me. The benefits were the opportunity to interact with students representing various cultural and global milieus, gaining background about their home educational systems, and being exposed to different cultural values. For example, as noted in one of the Pathways to Global Communications’ workshops, Americans are far more likely to consider the individual first, rather than the welfare of the group or community.

Some of the challenges of working with culturally diverse students were developing awareness of different international behavioral norms.For example, Asian students are sometimes quieter and more deferential to authority than American students, who are encouraged to speak up and tout their attributes. An international student may intellectually understand the importance of speaking up, using a firm handshake and maintaining eye contact during a job interview, but find it difficult to actually do so. I used a number of role-playing techniques to simulate the atmosphere of a job interview in order to help the student become more comfortable in actual job interview situations.

There are often language difficulties with international students. Sometimes a student presents a perfectly constructed resume, but clearly doesn’t understand the English conversation at hand. He or she will nod and say that they understand, but they clearly do not. Some methods to remedy this include encouraging conversation either with the teacher or with students’ peers; as well as getting  the student to repeat back the instructions the teacher has given. It is understandable for a teacher to become impatient in these situations, but I try to remind myself to stay patient. I reflect upon the student’s courage and moxie in embarking on study in a foreign country AND trying to master the language. The Writing Center has been very helpful to my students who are struggling with expressing themselves in English.

It is easy to take for granted that an international student will share the same political and social views as Americans. As Professor Royster of Georgia Tech mentioned in her workshop, we must never give up on using our imaginations to project how very different other cultures’ mindsets and values are. The project’s workshop on Social Commentary and Memes, in which we were shown illustrations representing both American and Mexican social and political viewpoints,  was very illuminating in reminding us how easy it is to make (often erroneous) assumptions about other people’s views. I believe the visual aspect of this workshop reinforced many of the concepts we discussed as a group.

We must always try to put ourselves into our students shoes’ to try to bridge some of the communication gaps that exist between different cultures.

**How to Move Theory into Practice**

One of the takeaways from participating in the NEA project is the value in providing both American and international students with a written statement of assignments that are to be done after meeting with me. (Until now, I have done this orally, and the results of students completing their assignments have been variable.) This tool provides clarity and a solid reference point for students, and allows them to become less dependent on contacting me with questions on material we have covered. It works to focus my thoughts and intentions, and puts the onus on me as a teacher to be as student-centered and clear as possible.

Another tool that will be of use to international students is to encourage them to hone their research skills. By utilizing both the internet and the library, they can expand their knowledge of relevant career-related material, language skills, as well as familiarity with American cultural and business norms.

**Teaching Goals**

Participating in the NEA project has broadened my awareness of the need to re-frame some of my approaches to respecting perceived differences within and across languages; adopting an attitude of deliberative inquiry; proceeding with more consciousness, sensitivity and critical attention to writing and communication; and encouraging students to take an active role in their understanding of writing and communication. We live in a truly global world, which represents a very exciting paradigm for teaching and communication. With the support of the CET and fellow faculty members, I aspire to honing my skills as a teacher in hopes of maximizing the very positive outcomes and possibilities that arise from working in the extremely culturally diverse environment of FIT.

This year, through the support of the CET, I had the opportunity of participating, with a colleague, in the Fashion Colloquium in Sao Paulo, Brazil. We delivered a presentation to a diverse group of international faculty and fashion students on the importance of internships in launching a fashion career, and provided extensive background materials on facilitating the search for internships in an international milieu. The exchange of ideas between participants provided stimulating dialogue about cultural differences and attitudes regarding fashion education. The opportunity for professional development was extremely eye-opening. As a teaching goal, I hope to take advantage of further opportunities to develop my professional skills in hopes of providing the most satisfying and comprehensive experience possible for my students.