

Teaching Philosophy

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Understanding context leads students to purposeful artmaking, inclusivity, and new discoveries. Regardless of medium, I divide my foundation courses into three parts, using the paradigm of *User, Hacker, and Developer*. Initially, I use these terms to introduce the ideas of art with familiar terms, as most students understand these terms from the field of computer science:

- A *User* does not create new code or software, but merely interfaces with what has already been created. Everyone in the room is a user because they all use computers.
- A *Hacker* tests the limits of existing software or code by changing it, adding to it, or using it for a different purpose than for what it was originally intended.
- A *Developer* makes new software.

After the students define the terms from this perspective, I ask them to apply these ideas to art:

- A *User* adheres to set conventions.
- A *Hacker* remixes those conventions.
- A *Developer* creates new conventions.

Then I propose that this set of terms be applied to the work the students do throughout the course. Students become *Users* as they learn the jargon, techniques, and tropes of art. These may be formal elements, art historical terms, and technical skills or vocabulary related to a specific medium. As *Users*, the students learn these skills and concepts through short exercises, copying works from art history, and creating original artworks with the constraints of topical skills and techniques. The styles, techniques, and marks learned are also discussed in terms of symbol and the potential of what each one can represent based on its origin and use.

After this point, the students are ready to hack. Throughout every course I require students to keep a visual diary of their own artwork and the artwork they research in the form of a Tumblr (online blog). This tool becomes especially useful in this section of the semester as students see the work they have done alongside artwork of interest to them. The layout of the Tumblr provides quick comparisons to illuminate connections. From here the students are given

assignments that require them to steal from those they admire as well as other visual sources to make remixed artworks. Through various constraints, the students are pushed to crop, combine, rotate, add to, scale up or down, reconfigure, and layer known elements in their artworks. The trajectory of this work builds on what they have learned about symbol in the first section to understand how various juxtapositions of those symbols can compound to create a new meaning.

I also encourage the students to hack each other. The Tumblr, group critiques, and other in-class group exercises facilitate communication. This is also done through student-led group texts and Facebook groups to communicate between classes, share information or research, and give feedback on work in progress.

The final *Developer* section of the class uses the research, knowledge, and skill gained previously in the semester to transition students to creating artworks with fewer constraints from the instructor and more constraints self imposed by each student. Now students are not just solving problems presented, but offering some of their own problems to solve. This serves as a bridge for young artists from completing art assignments to developing a studio practice. In this section we also contextualize and deconstruct the *User, Hacker, Developer* paradigm. We investigate its relationship to the Modernist ideas of progress and the avant garde, and then examine how those ideas are still in use. Students are asked to decide how they align themselves--do they subscribe to these notions? How far is the *User, Hacker, Developer* paradigm useful?

Through the process of navigating the *User, Hacker Developer* paradigm in each course, the students learn field-specific terminology and techniques, practice researching and reiterating what they find, and wield all of these to a level that allows them to ask the questions they want to investigate visually and conceptually. But even more than that can be gained on this journey. As students learn the art historical context of terms and techniques as *Users*, recontextualize those items as *Hackers*, and judge the contemporary relevance of those items in the context of their work in the *Developer* section, students become purposeful artmakers that use “context” as a tool. They are empowered to teach themselves through research. Understanding the Western aesthetic tradition as a specific context allows them to gain respect and understanding of other ways of working. Together, these things can lead to new connections and discoveries.