

## Notes from *Tricks of the Trade: Arts in Education*

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Panel discussion. Series description: “November: Arts in Education: *How can I use my skills as an artist to teach the community?*” Within the series is today’s panel: *Local Artists and Experiences*. Guest Speakers/Panelists: Moderator- Lisa Donovan, Creative Arts Lesley University; Yura Adams, IS183 Art School Educator; Jamie Choquette, Drury High School Music Educator; Greg Scheckler, Associate Professor of Visual Arts at MCLA. In this handout are opinions from Prof. Scheckler: to learn more about him see <http://www.gregscheckler.com>

### Local Reaches Global

The local artist – loving them is sort of like rooting for your favorite home team. But the artists who live near you probably are local only in the superficial sense of living near you. Most likely, they sell their art, skills, and knowledge to a variety of locations, probably they went to school at many different schools, and probably they have a website that has global, instant reach. Here in the Berkshires, artists who are also college teachers include National Book Award bestselling authors, painters whose artworks are owned by major museums, illustrators who are published all over the world. The question for arts survival today is *how well do you distribute your work globally, no matter where you live?* But once you’re doing that, you’re no longer ‘local’ in the sense of only working in one small community.

Sadly, major art magazines like *Art in America*, *Art Forum*, and *Art News* are still focused mainly on New York / Los Angeles. These art scenes are exciting, but they represent only the tiniest slice of all of the arts today. Almost all art never appears on a museum wall and never appears in the big city. Popular reality-tv shows like *Work of Art: the Next Great Artist* provide irrelevant stereotypes of the artist-contestant, who’s assigned kitschy mini-projects and never involved with in-depth, years-long forms of creativity that most artists rely on. These media venues do not represent most artists’ careers.

Consider the basic facts: According to the annual *US Occupational Outlooks Handbook*, there are ~700,000 professional artists in the United States (painters, sculptors, professional crafters, photographers, designers, illustrators, animators and more). Their average wage is around 40-50k annual. How many of these thousands of artists are featured in the so-called top art magazines, or how many are in the MASS MoCA’s of the world? Almost none. Even among fine art painters (~10,000 individuals), really only about 100 show up in the major museums. Almost all artists survive far outside the dominant, big-name gallery-museum establishment. This is not good news for the museums: most artists don’t at all need the museum establishment to survive. In fact working with the big museums is probably a good indication that you are a truly local artist – *local to the insular museum scene* – and very likely unaffiliated with the far more diverse art scene that occurs everywhere else. For educators at the college-level, the professor is likely to have already taught and studied in a variety of settings across the nation, and exhibited widely, before earning the full-time job as professor. Such teachers, moving through a variety of schools and locations, may live next to you but have rich histories in many different markets.

### How do Artists Earn a Living Anyway?

How artists earn a living: *multiple income streams*. The income streams are usually a mix of selling your hands (things you can do / creating new artworks, commissions), selling your brains (knowledge about the arts), selling your products (artworks you’ve already made). Sell what you can do, sell what you know, sell what you make. As many as 75% of all artists – according to the National Endowment for the Arts – also moonlight, working non-art jobs at least for some portion of every year. If you’re in the business of selling what you know, then in art you are probably an art consultant or an art teacher, providing workshops, courses, and presentations.

## What's Needed to Become an Art Professor? Or to Be a Good Professor?

It was an odd choice. As a doughy, sniffly, allergic-to-everything youth I decided to learn how to play clarinet. My teacher, the Big Band musician Benny Ehr, was 86, had a bad case of emphysema, and three teeth. And he always proved that the impossible was possible. Whenever I couldn't figure out how to play a difficult passage, and gave up in frustration, he would take my clarinet, and play the passage. Perfectly. Every time. With only 3 teeth. I always thought 'You bastard! How did you do that!?' And yet every time he always demonstrated that the music actually could be played.

In other words, as a teacher, he could do the things he was teaching – he was the real deal. I've always listened to this idea, and I think it is the true mark of any good teacher: you can do what you are teaching. It's the same in most fields: the ski instructor knows how to ski, the accounting teacher actually is good at finance, the history teacher really does know more about history than most people, and the art teacher excels at art-making. Expertise isn't just about knowing things, it's about being able to do them and do them well. Contrary to the stereotype of the professor as book-learned but impractical, every professor I know actually has huge experience as a practicing professional.

The college art professor accomplishes many tasks at once: effective art teaching, professional exhibit and/or publication of new original artworks borne out of a consistent practice of art-making, student advising, plus departmental and college-wide administrative workloads. The professor's workload is intense, often 70-80 hours per week – just like many contemporary jobs. You'll need good teamwork skills, outstanding communications and time management. The work is so intense that it's best never to think of teaching as a back-up career: it has to be a central focus, a primary passion. It does depend a lot on the kind of college the professor works at... some are teaching institutions where teaching comes first, others may be research institutions where there's less teaching and more art-making. Either way, expect the job to be the central focus of your creative life.

Good art professors are working professional artists who maintain an active art practice, who teach fair and rigorous courses, and who communicate well. They have clear understandings of how higher education works, why art belongs in the college setting, and how it benefits these institutions. They also have a passion for teaching, for art history, and for their own art-making. As an artist-professor, usually you'll need

- **A Decent Graduate Degree:** in most (not all) cases, the art professor must have a terminal degree in the field, such as the Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA), or the PhD in studio art practice. Many graduate students invest a few years working on their art after the undergraduate degree before applying for graduate school.
- **Master Your Craft:** you've got to become so good at the art that you have something valuable to teach. If you teach intro drawing, you've got to be excellent and knowledgeable with drawing. Don't just make art: study it, improve it, innovate along with it. Mastery includes understanding there's more to learn and more art to make; mastery includes continuing to learn more, refine skills, explore.
- **Document Everything That You Do.** Colleges often include bureaucracies; to earn jobs and promotions you'll need to be able to show documentation of all of your work.
- **Make Art and Exhibit.** No doubt as an artist you already have a strong vision for art that you create. But to qualify for professor jobs, probably you'll need to do 3-5 exhibits per year. You can enter shows, contact galleries even while you're an undergraduate student. Make your own shows, create a temporary gallery. Find exhibits to apply to online. Start with exhibits that are free to enter – and yes, you probably need access to a digital camera to send photos of your art.
- **Be Mobile:** apply to all jobs that you're qualified for and be ready to move. Just because you have the basic qualifications for a job at your local college doesn't mean they'll hire you or that they'll even have professor jobs to offer. Competition is intense. According to the College Art Association, there's about 600-700 applicants for every 1 full-time, tenure track job opening. To have a chance of getting an interview, you'll need to be ready to move to the job... be mobile, willing to go anywhere.

- **Participate:** conferences, residencies, online arts groups / discussion lists, teachers' groups.
- **Be Experienced:** get experience teaching before trying to be a full-time professor. It's important to test your interest in teaching in small ways before big ways. Experience also implies that you've done good work for other people... make sure you have a full suite of good people who can and are willing to write you excellent references.
- **You Don't Get What You Deserve, You Get What You Negotiate:** The job is not about you and how wonderful you are, oh great holy artist, it is about what value you contribute every day to the wellbeing of the entire organization, especially to your students. As a professor, much of your marketing will be 'in-house marketing,' that is, finding good ways to let leadership and your co-workers know about the quality of the work you do and its value for the entire organization.

## Kinds of College-Level art teaching:

Most tenure-track art professor jobs require significant prior teaching experience as a prerequisite of the job. Usually, the ads mention a need for 3-5 years full-time college teaching experience. Thus a Catch-22: if you have experience you can apply for the job, but how do you get experience if you haven't got a teaching job? What can you do to get concrete teaching experience before applying for tenure-track gigs?

Besides the tenure-track professor jobs, there's a variety of levels of teaching that higher education relies on, that may be of help to you to gain experience. Most college art teaching requires the MFA or PhD degree; plan on graduate school. Most involve some form of part-time work, building up the skills and experiences needed to become a full-time professor:

- **Undergraduate Teaching Assistant:** suppose as a student you did outstanding work and you established a good rapport with the professor. After the course is done you could suggest to the professor that you work as a teaching assistant for the next version of the course, or even volunteer to be a tutor for students who need some extra help. If the professor agrees, then you are starting to earn some college-level teaching experience. At MCLA, we've set-up a teaching assistant course so that advanced undergraduate students can get college credit for assisting, and can have a forum for learning about how to teach. It is never enough to just start teaching – it's important to learn how to teach, what scientific studies show as effective strategies in the classroom, and what you should teach given your own interests in the visual arts.
- **Graduate Teaching Assistant:** As a condition of entering one of the bigger MFA programs, many schools award graduate students with a teaching assistantship – often to provide a teacher for an intro level course. This can work extremely well when the grad student is mentored by a responsible professor who helps the student learn how to teach, or if the grad school provides concrete teacher-training workshops. But when graduate students are left to their own devices, sometimes undergraduates must suffer through a poorly planned course taught by a novice. And for that reason, while the graduate teaching assistantship does count as serious college-level teaching experience, full-time teachers won't normally look at it as the equivalent of full-time teaching experience. You can use the assistantship as a stepping stone, but assisting one class per semester does not count as 'full-time teaching' when applying for tenure-track jobs.
- **Graduate Instructor of Record:** in contrast to the graduate teaching assistant, some schools offer grad students the opportunity to be wholly responsible for a course – they are no longer assisting a professor, but actually are responsible for every aspect of the course. This is a step up in responsibility and respectability. Some schools will have graduate students work as a t.a. for a semester or two, and then promote the t.a. to 'instructor of record.' Being the instructor of record is much more impressive than being just a t.a. and is essentially the same as being a part-time professor.
- **Part-time professor:** most colleges and universities hire professors for full-time jobs as well as for part-time jobs. The full-time professor may teach three or four courses per semester, advise a group of art majors or graduate students, serve on college committees, and be involved with the administrative workings of the school while also producing significant new artworks, being in exhibits, etc. In contrast the

part-time professor (often called an Adjunct) is hired to teach one to three courses, usually less than the normal full-time workload, and isn't hired to do advising, committee work and all the extras that full-timers do. If the part-time teacher is doing enough teaching, then part-time gigs can be thought of as full-time equivalents for purposes of applying to the tenure-track job.

- **Temporary Full-Time Professor, non-tenure:** after you've served as a t.a. or instructor of record, then this is the job that you want for a couple of years before applying to most tenure-track teaching jobs. First of all, it's full-time which means you'll teach a lot every semester. And like the tenure-track professors, you'll probably have administrative and advising responsibilities. Almost all of the larger art programs in the US hire a group of relatively new or inexperienced teachers on 1-2 year non-tenure contracts. This serves a lot of good purposes: it gives new teachers a great chance to get serious experience, it allows organizations a chance to test how a teacher does before making the long-term commitment of tenure-track hiring, it brings in a lot of new ideas and dynamic new viewpoints and keeps bringing them in due to the high rate of turnover for the 1-2 year contracts... everyone benefits.
- **Workshops, Specialty Presentation or Lecture Series:** another good way to start acquiring teaching experience is to link up with an area arts organization and offer to provide brief courses, such as one or two day workshops. In fact many artists earn good livings on the workshop circuit, gaining strong reputations and providing workshops across the nation. A benefit is that you'll have students only for a few days rather than an entire semester – it helps to have a prepared, very focused course for this kind of teaching.
- **Museum or Gallery Education:** a large and often fantastic amount of art teaching happens in the museum and gallery setting – the docents, the art interpreters, the many artists who work with kids' groups. All of these can be serious, excellent teaching experience. Why not contact the nearest museum and start by volunteering to help them? Some museums have established docent training programs where experienced teachers provide instruction about the art and how to talk about it with audiences, or how to work with kids' groups.
- **Exceptions for Awesome Job Experience in Your Field of Art:** did you write a famous book about art, or are you showing in the most well-known, art celebrity high-priced galleries for fine art or do you have dozens of years as a working professional designer, illustrator, or other kind of artist? You might be able to market these kinds of activities as relevant job experiences that qualify you to become a professor. Sometimes colleges and universities will hire a well-known artist to strengthen the school's reputation and help students gain real-world art connections. This is, however, exceedingly rare. Many incredibly skilled and accomplished artists are poor teachers. Often the college is better off hiring a lesser-known but good artist who is also an excellent teacher.

## Where to Find College-Level Teaching Positions:

- **College Art Association** <http://www.collegeart.org> best website for all things art
- **Chronicle of Higher Education** <http://chronicle.com> check the faculty/research jobs
- **Higher Ed Jobs** <http://www.higheredjobs.com>
- **HireCulture** <http://www.hireculture.org>
- **LinkedIn:** <http://www.linkedin.com> many good art discussion groups
- **Your network of professors, teachers:** start with the teachers you know and ask their advice.

## For Further Reading: Teaching for Artists

**Teaching Art: Academies from Vasari to Albers**, by Carl Goldstein. Note: great background information on the relationships of teaching methods, content and style to underlying philosophies of historical art movements.

**How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching**, ed. by Susan Ambrose. Note: excellent, straightforward information regarding teaching strategies that studies suggest are most effective.

**The Talent Code**, by Daniel Coyle. Note: by far the best nonfiction read about how cultures develop enclaves of super-talented individuals, and, how the brain functions to strengthen itself through good teaching, coaching.

**U.S. Occupational Outlook Reports:** <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>