

# Thomas Murray

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## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The teaching of theatre is the teaching of citizenship itself. Within the studio environment, we practice collaboration, dialogue, presence, understanding, and empathy. It cannot be created in isolation, and it cannot be replicated effectively through virtual media. It is a lens through which we can see the world - rehearsing for life we have not yet lived, placing ourselves in the positions of others, celebrating free speech, and reaching for a more just and equitable society. I am compelled into the classroom by my instincts as a director to forge connections and invite a sense of play. The building of a studio course in collaboration with my students is the microcosm building of community. The risks we take in that brave space become the seeds of cultural creation.

I foreground each course I teach with a solicitation of community agreements. I have adopted some from my own mentors and teachers along the way, but I also gain new suggestions from my students each semester. The staples of these agreements include the maintenance of a safe and brave space, the encouragement to move forward or move back alternately in participatory activities, and the reminder to practice self-care and to ask for what one needs. I remind students in a moment of risk to push generosity to oneself and push generosity to the room, and they will find that generosity flows back to them. Rehearsals, after all, are temporary spaces. From day one, my students and I work to build a sense of ensemble where such risk-taking is rewarded. We return to our community agreements at the top of each class period, where they are accepted communally or negotiated with recurring flexibility.

Theatre asks us to be serious about play. It requires rigor, the pursuit of passion, and the inclination to ascribe meaning to the expression of the voice and the body in a given space. It asks us to be detailed, time-oriented, and receptive to the impulses of others. Exercises and improvisations are essential to that practice. In the course of my teaching and my directing, I

have adopted games used by forerunners as diverse as Viola Spolin, Augusto Boal, Michael Rohd, Ping Chong, Celeste Miller, John Collins, Moisés Kaufman, Keith Johnstone, and Anne Bogart. These collaborative skills learned through play are fungible and can be applied to activities and business beyond the cultural sphere.

I assess my students using a range of accessible rubrics. Performances are graded by how effectively students meet articulated benchmarks; grades are accompanied by extensive qualitative critiques. Because a liberal arts education requires the articulation of a student's written expression, I also build composition exercises into each curriculum that are assessed both for their relative content and the quality of their command of language and syntax. Since dialogue is an essential component of democratic expression, I also build discourse into our coursework through peer responses (often using *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process*). Class participation is thus initially evaluated at the midterm, offering even the most reticent student guidance for improvement by the term's end.

Each class I lead brings different challenges, and I aim to meet my students with the qualities I most revered in my favorite teachers: an open mind, an unquenchable passion for the subject matter, and high expectations. I learn from my students' curiosity, and I utilize student feedback to calibrate course content from semester to semester. As my students refine their skills as storytellers, their interpretive acts become the coalescence of information into meaning. They learn that theatrical expression is at once ancient and contemporary, eternal and evanescent. It is not merely an end unto itself but also a gateway to their own thoughtful and cultural lives.