



Jed Morfit, RISD MFA Sculpture 2005

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Presentation: *Challenges as a New Faculty*

Photography by Emily Beltz, MA Teaching + Learning in Art + Design 2009

## HOW DO YOU TEACH SCULPTURE?

In a sculpture critique at RISD, one person might be working in sound, the next person is making little tiny miniatures with speakers plugged into the floor, and another, like me, might be a pretty traditional figurative sculptor. Even as a graduate student, I thought, "This is so slippery. How do you have this conversation and have it be relevant? What is the conversation? What are we teaching here?"

Richard Stockton College had never had a full-time sculptor in the art department when they asked me to come build a sculpture program, so they were looking to me and asking, "What is this sculpture program going to look like?" I was thrown right back to the questions that I've been asking myself all along. What is sculpture? How do you teach something that you'd have a legitimately hard time defining? What am I going to teach? And how will I know if I'm succeeding?

I teach at a liberal arts college. Most students don't usually come to Stockton for the arts program. What I'm trying to do here is teach sculpture from the perspective of it being filter through which to see the world. I think about sculpture more as a *process* than as a product. It's not a bust, it's not a thing you can point to and say, "This is sculpture." You go to PS1 or you go to the Whitney Museum now, and there are going to be moments when you say, "It looks like a fire extinguisher, but it could be the sculpture." We've had that experience and that's a legitimate experience. So the process is an investigative one, a rigorous intellectual engagement with the material world. The world is full of stuff and we make sculptural decisions everyday. In class, we talk about form and color and texture and surface. That happens all the time. What we're doing in class is taking that apart, starting to codify it and ask, "What are we looking at?" Let's get more specific. Let's get more rigorous.

## THE STUDENTS ARE BRAND NEW TO ART CLASSES

What I offer is more of a material culture education than a strictly sculptural one. That's the high theory. The reality is, after we graduate from RISD, many of us who teach are not teaching at RISD. My students have never taken a 3-D class. Many of them have not taken an art class, period. The students I get are brand new to this. Coming from RISD, I'm armed to the teeth with contemporary sculpture, but modernism has not made it to my institution's region. Abstraction does not naturally play here. It's hard to believe that that's true, but it's *absolutely* true. No one makes it. We could look at it on the wall and talk about it, but the students aren't interested in it yet. And they don't draw as a way of thinking or as a process. So we're really talking about introductions.

I came to teaching wanting to have a collegiate-level experience of sculpture, and what I ended up getting, initially, was much less. Some of our first projects have very basic results. And I get really excited about them! "This is great!" I say. "This is tremendous improvement!" Then later I see the work is really not that good, though it's great for where we're at.

### **SYLLABUS AS CONTRACT**

Where I teach, your syllabus is your contract. Everything has to be in the syllabus up front. Attendance is part of that. A student gets four absences – I don't want to know if you're sick or whatever. After four you drop a full letter grade. After six you can't pass the class. It's a policy that has real teeth and real ramifications. I told a student on Friday that she's not passing the class. She had her sixth absence one week away from the end of the semester. That's hard, but it's easier if you put it in writing.

### **ONE THEME, MANY MATERIALS**

My 3-D class has some of my better thinking in it. I have my students choose a single subject at the start of the semester because I don't want them fooling around with too many ideas at the same moment. They're getting introduced to a lot all at once, and we follow through with a bunch of materials because materials are so integral to a sculptors' life. By sticking with a theme – for example, a circus theme based on Alexander Calder's circuses – we can keep the focus on the materials. I try to keep the work open-ended but at the same time I want to make each process as rigorous and specific as I can. Some students have never thought dimensionally, and it's a skill to go back and forth from drawing to thinking dimensionally.

### **ASSESSMENT TOOLS**

The contour strikes me as a place where it's easy to start. That's where the most information is when you're trying to sculpt something, particularly representationally, so we talk about contours at every stage. It becomes an assessment tool: this is what we were capable of in the beginning, and we got to this at the end of the semester. The jump is pretty apparent.

I take photographs of every assignment from every student, which is another element of assessment. I have them do loads of drawings that correspond with each assignment, but initially most of my students can't draw so my drawing assignments are of the broadest sort. I'm trying to get them to conceptualize. First I have them use Google to find images of what they'll be working on. If the assignment is about contours, it's much easier if they have seen and drawn some contours than if I just explain it to them.

## **THE DIRECTION OF MY TEACHING**

With a strong emphasis on general studies, a third of my coursework is taught in a "synthesis class." The students are not art majors and there aren't any prerequisites. The synthesis class is a liberal arts hybrid with anthropology, sociology and religion studies all mixed in. We're looking at how cultures indicate and communicate value through their object making. We read about it, we talk about it, we look at different examples, and they do some writing on it. Then we try it. This is the direction I'd like to take my teaching in: we discuss a concept and then we put it in to practice in the classroom.

## **CRITICAL FEEDBACK FORMS**

In all of the classes I teach, everybody writes a critique note for the other students in the classroom. At a critique, we can all talk. Some people talk more than others and I'll talk more than anybody, but a student won't get a balanced opinion. So at the end of every critique, a student gets a stack of feedback forms from everyone in the class on their piece. I have every student put a grade on the form as well. In this class everyone assigns grades, but you only give one A. We count them up, and whomever gets the most A's gets the A.

## **STUDENT FEEDBACK ON MY COURSES**

The feedback I got from my students at the end of the semester was that the work was too easy and the thinking was too hard. I thought, "Wow! I've got to really move the paradigm around for these kids." What I don't want to end up doing is two and a half hours a day of craft time; there has to be some thinking behind it. That's going to be the hardest part. When these students come to art, they're thinking the course is going to be an opportunity to make stuff without getting intellectually engaged. I'm moving the discussion from "let's just build some things" to "let's get intellectually engaged."

## **"EVIDENCE-BASED" EVALUATION**

My wife is a clinical social worker, and she's very interested in evidence-based treatment. How do you know if your therapy is working or not? This has become a major concern for me. I pay a lot of attention to assessment and evaluation. I use Easy Grade Pro. It costs about \$80, and I can't recommend it highly enough. It puts every assignment and evaluation in a system. When I started using it last semester, the average grade dropped for my classes

from an A- to a B, but my teaching evaluations rose. Students like getting regular feedback, and with Easy Grade Pro they know all the way along where they are. There's never any mystery about their grades.

When I was in the sculpture department at RISD, you got a grade at the end of the semester. It could have been anything. I'm very concerned with giving grades that come back all the time. I found as a new junior faculty that I was easily swayed by sob stories. I also found I got a little soft in my grading because I so badly wanted the students to do well. By using something like Easy Grade Pro, I am more rigorous with the students because I have recorded the quality of their work all semester. The grade just falls into place.

### **TEACHING IS MY CAREER**

I'd like to close with an interesting conversation I had with a friend who was talking about not going to teach at a far-away college for a one-year appointment. "In the end," he said, "teaching is not my career, sculpture is my career. Teaching is something I use to support my career, and I can find other things." When he said that, I thought, "Teaching is my career. I'm a practicing artist and it's critical to me, but teaching is core. It's integral to my practice in every way." I think that's an important question to ask yourself as you pursue teaching in art and design.

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As a RISD graduate student Jed Morfit won an Award of Excellence for his work, wrote his thesis *No Ideas But Things*, and received a Sheridan Certificate from Brown University in 2005. He was the first recipient of the Dean of Graduate Studies Award for teaching advancement. Morfit taught at RISD and the University of Connecticut before becoming an assistant professor at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey, where he is responsible for the sculpture curriculum, including facilities, faculty and critics.