Process and Apprenticeship

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In our current environment, teaching transpires virtually and allows for new methods and opportunities to learn, but it can create gulfs of inequality. Recognizing the shortcomings of this medium, I deploy methods that give my students access to their peers and myself in a capacity that values the notion of an apprenticeship that is cooperative and reciprocal. For instance, I might wish to instruct students in the ways of folklore fieldwork; however, I cannot give them that knowledge without them beginning to attempt that work themselves. In this virtual space, folklore fieldwork is conducted in a different fashion and might require the use of online forums or video calls. Here again we are all apprentices learning together the tools necessary to conduct our work online. I specifically avoid using the term master in this space as I choose to regard myself as an apprentice always, perhaps Head Apprentice if pressed to volunteer some form of authority, but an apprentice nonetheless.

Early in my academic career I pursued vocal performance, and in my studies, I worked with my instructors to determine what material I would perform and engage with each semester. We chose my repertoire based on my range, interests, genre preferences, and goals. Cultivating that kind of relationship with my professor allowed me the opportunity to practice in a weekly tutorial setting how to be part of the process of my own learning. My teaching methods are influenced by these interactions in which I was an active participant in the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of my craft. In all fields there is an element of craft and that element, however different it might be from one to the next, is the opportunity for students to be active participants themselves in their own learning processes. In this setting, I was an apprentice, but my professors acknowledged their own continued educational pursuits and spoke of the conferences and workshops they attended. This concretized the fact that my own teachers, whom I viewed as masters of their craft, were themselves apprentices.

My experience learning from and with other apprentices informs the lens with which I approach teaching. As an informal apprentice myself of fiber arts and folklore studies long before I began to teach or work formally in these spaces, I believe that intentional action is integral to one’s learning process and that the trial and error involved in everything from discussion sections to spinning wool into yarn is part and parcel to the course of learning. Allowing students the space to make mistakes in a safe environment gives them the opportunity to learn and improve their approaches to their work. As apprentices in their field, be that folklore, anthropology, or textile art among others, they will be supported by the methods I suggest here. I strive to create an inclusive, inquiry-based learning environment in which my students feel comfortable, exploring topics about which they are passionate and engaging in critical reflection of their own work and those who came before them in the fields of folklore and material culture studies. My goal then is to cultivate a classroom in which I may guide students to the resources they need and seek, create awareness and understanding of differences of ability and access, empower them to ask questions and make mistakes, and support them with consistent and appropriate feedback throughout the learning process.