

*Tiana Blazquez*

Director • Choreographer • Teaching Artist

## Teaching Statement

My work as a teaching artist, director, and choreographer revolves around fostering the agency of young people. I believe that youth are not simply receivers of knowledge but are leaders and changemakers. I work from theories of intersectional feminist leadership and strive to embody and propose sustainable practices of revolution in my classroom spaces that result in equity and inclusivity for everyone.

My pedagogy is deeply rooted in constructivist theory, positioning teachers as students and students as teachers. I do not seek to simply empower my students but provide them with the opportunity to co-construct the classroom space, culture, and curriculum in recognition of their expertise and unique individual needs. I am continually analyzing what politics are at play and how power is functioning in the spaces and systems I am facilitating within in order to offer my students pathways to understand the possibilities of how the role of power can be held and by whom. For example, in my undergraduate Foundations of Acting course the first assignment given to students is a devised physical story in which they are asked to devise an original piece of theatre using only physicality. Students have the choice to devise their piece based off an already existing story, a personal story of their own, or an original story to create their original physical theatre piece. By providing my students with choice within the structure, I give them agency in completing the assignment. We begin to co-construct what the learning in this specific classroom looks like through a shared authority between teacher and student.

In addition to recognizing and amplifying student expertise through constructivist theory, I work from a proficiency model that functions under the assumption that students are always competent and capable to complete the task at hand. It is my belief that students exist as complex beings who have different needs within a space of learning, and that difficulties in learning likely stem from a lack of differentiated learning design. Differentiated learning design acknowledges variance among students and asks teachers to respond by varying aspects of their teaching in the form of multi-modal presentation, accommodations, or multiple strategies. Differentiated learning design is demonstrated in my second arts integration lesson out of a series of three, designed for high school students studying the 20th century Civil Rights movement. Students move through the Drama-Based Pedagogy strategies of Living Portraits, Role on the Wall, Paired Improvisation, and Visual Dramaturgy before ending with reflection. Starting with Living Portraits, students are asked to use tableaux, or frozen images, to interpret historical photographs of two Southern Democrats who played a large role in the civil rights

movement – George Wallace and Orval Faubus. After creating their tableaux, students share them with their peers to analyze. By embodying historical figures, students are reminded that the relationships and actions of these people are more complex than the singular images they used to create their tableaux. In Role on the Wall, students shift to focus on strategies used by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X in the Civil Rights movement. Using two large pieces of paper with outlines of human figures on them, students are asked to name out words, phrases, or messages that each of these men might have received while doing their work in the Civil Rights movement. Student responses are written on the paper and categorized visually using colored markers. Next, participants are asked how the historical figures might have felt inside, based on the outside messages. The facilitator then writes those feelings on the inside of the figure and asks students to connect specific “outside” messages to the inner feelings. Using the information from Role on the Wall, students move onto Paired Improvisation. In pairs, one student takes on the role of Martin Luther King Jr. and the other student takes on the role of Malcom X. Using the following scenario, students are asked to have an improvised conversation in-role: “The Civil Rights movement has come to a head. White Southern Democrats in positions of power have emerged as unrelenting and violent. Black citizens have been sprayed with water from high pressure fire hoses and have had dogs sent to attack them in moments of peaceful protest. Citizens resisting these forms of oppression are unsure which approach might be the best to respond to these unrelenting and violent acts. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X have come together at Martin Luther King Jr.’s home in Montgomery, Alabama to make their cases for why their approaches might be best to address these recent events.” Finally, students complete the Visual Dramaturgy strategy as a full group. After listening to an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, students are invited to silently draw images of the people, places, events, and/or feelings that they remember most from the speech on a large piece of paper, without using any words. Students then take a silent “gallery walk” around the paper to see all the images created and are asked to pick a classmate’s image and add to it, again without using any words. After one more gallery walk, students are invited to fill in the remaining empty space on the page with the frame of connecting the drawings without adding anything directly to images that has already been created. As physical activity levels within each of these strategies increase during the lesson, emotional investment levels within the strategies decrease, allowing students to manage their emotional engagement effectively. By avoiding the rigor of high physical engagement paired with high emotional engagement, students can self-regulate and prioritize their needs and well-being throughout the lesson. Additionally, the order of strategies in this lesson works to engage different modes of learning (visual, textual, oral, embodied, etc.) in its scaffolding. By providing variety within the lesson design I acknowledge each individual and can ensure that all students are able to access the material in the way best suited for their needs.

Reflection also exists as a core part of my teaching practice, both for teacher and student. As a teacher, I exist within a mode of reflexivity, consistently reflecting on my own values, beliefs, privileges, and practices as a teaching artist and human. I am committed to my own self-actualization understanding that without it, I would not have the capacity to best serve my students. For my students, reflection is integrated within every strategy and session and follows the Drama-Based Pedagogy structure of “Describe, Analyze, Relate” (DAR). For example,

after facilitating a workshop on Viewpoints training in the combination graduate/undergraduate Directing Methods and Practices course, I invited students to answer the following questions: Describe - What did we do in these exercises? How did we use repetition, shape, and/or gesture? Analyze - How do repetition, shape, and/or gesture inform our storytelling as actors and/or directors? How might these viewpoints be used in a rehearsal space or creation process? Relate - What is something you are hoping to bring into your own process from our exploration today? How might you use these viewpoints in the future? By providing students with an opportunity to reflect on and assess their progress through the how, why, and when of their learning, it transforms learning into an active process that allows them to be agents in their experience.

I strive for my classroom spaces to be “brave” vs. “safe” to encourage students to take risks while respecting and acknowledging others. I consistently co-create community agreements with students at the beginning of each learning process. Doing this allows both the students and teacher to be transparent in their needs and sparks the beginnings of creating a connection among community members that extends beyond existing within the same learning space. In my Musical Theatre class for students ages 8-13 who identify as differently abled, I frame community agreements using the prompt, “To set ourselves up for a successful session, we will agree on some guidelines for our time together to build our community and skills in a positive way.” Following the prompt, I might invite students to think about what they need to be fully present in the space, how they would like to be treated, or what structures would help them participate most fully during class. In an undergraduate course, community agreements might also include expectations surrounding grading or an attendance policy. I make a point to acknowledge that community agreements are a living document that always hold the possibility to shift and change, just as our community might shift and change during our time together. Expectations around the form and function of the brave space are established by co-constructing these community agreements.

The foundation of my classroom and artistry is a deep regard for structure that allows for exploration and expansion. My students can bravely discover their personhood as it presents itself through co-constructed coursework and an acknowledgement of themselves and others in the classroom space. By rooting my pedagogy in practices that reveal student agency, the possibilities of learning in the classroom expand and result in a more meaningful learning experience for all.