Teaching Philosophy
By Ed Speyers

Knowing how to guide and lead students effectively is perhaps in some ways more simplified in the less subjective "hard" sciences where end results - "answers" - may be more easily defined. For example, a chemical equation cannot have 25 different correct answers for each of 25 different students. In the field of graphic design however, assigning the same homework project to 25 students will result in 25 very different "answers" each of which can be interpreted as possessing significant merit. By virtue of its artistic orientation graphic design readily lends itself to subjective criticism which must be balanced with an enthusiastic encouragement of students. This enthusiastic encouragement - an indispensable response - best describes my fundamental approach as an instructor within this discipline.

It appears the majority of students in this discipline are well aware of significant degrees of subjectivism in the world of design. In anticipation of this potentially demoralizing attribute, instructors can take decisive steps to keep students interested and enthused as they proceed with their learning. The first and most important is to provide ongoing encouragement and to keep this encouragement within the context of relevancy (as opposed to flattery or insincere compliments that can have the opposite effects). It is very rare that a student's work can not be praised in some area and, using positive reinforcement, is essential when offering justified direction. As students tend to be self-conscious of their work, consistent encouragement is often the key to lessening inhibitions so that they can work and create to their fullest potential.

Another principle of classroom leadership is to make sure students know where you "stand" as a professor. It will only build confidence in students when, for example, they know well ahead of time exactly what the assignments require thus eliminating as much uncertainty as possible. It may appear counterintuitive at times that "narrowing down" a project's focus would allow for greater creativity within the assignment. However, when students are confident in the required direction they are less likely to feel overwhelmed or intimidated and will therefore attempt to exhibit their best creative efforts. Providing detailed instruction does not end in class time however and making yourself available outside of class time on a consistent basis is also a confidence building measure for students who will realize your commitment to their success. Within reason, students should not have to complain about lack of access to their professor.

An absolute essential of any teacher in the graphic design field is staying informed of the ever-changing design technology. Perhaps more than others, teachers of design are often on perpetual learning curves to be as much benefit to students as possible. Rather than trying to impart every nuance and subtlety of every design application, it is more critical that students are provided with a fundamental (basic) understanding of the design performance envelope and how this relates to the basic principles of design. The current rate of change in software releases is overwhelming and students should not be limited in their creative capacities by being forced to memorize only icons or menus. Assuring students have a strong grasp of the fundamentals *first* will help guide them through the intimidating world of software with its never ending cycle of new releases.

Instructors should work at integrating their professional experience into their assignments and overall teaching style. Students need to learn *how* a project is relevant and what they will encounter when they finish with formal schooling and confront the working world. What are some of the expectations of

today's design firms? What might a small business owner require from a design project to make him/her more successful? The goal of any post secondary learning institution should be to provide its students with the best training possible to prepare them for the professional world. Providing students with a strong understanding of what the business world expects from them will help in the transition from student to employee. And it is the teacher's role to give students the necessary tools *and the confidence to use them* to help them face those challenges.

Insofar as my philosophy of education was largely shaped by my undergraduate studies at a Christian college, my first priority is the student and the subject matter, that both are loved by the instructor, that the instructor has the student's best interest at heart. My first call is to be obedient to the Word of God, the Truth, so that "everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to His summons and service" as Os Guinness stated. (1998:4) My chief driving force within the classroom is one of articulating the "metaphysics" of design (what is ultimately real), the "epistemology" (what is ultimately true), and the "axiology" (what is of value) within the Christian worldview. Although students come into a classroom with different expectations, competencies and readiness, learning occurs when information enters the head, penetrates the heart, and works out in the hands (Acts 2:37). As Pearcey says, "There is a Biblical view of everything" (2004) and this includes the world of graphic design.

Lastly, although ultimately I teach for God and not a paycheck (Rom. 11:36), I teach from a knowledgeable competence and with a conviction that God is able to transform both the student and his/her work to His glory for the furtherance of His Kingdom. I do not pretend to have all the answers for all the possible questions and design-related situations that can arise. In many ways my philosophy of education is still a work in progress as I mature in my walk with the Lord. However, with my Christian conviction intact and with God's help I am confident of being able to instill a reverence and awe for the Living God as expressed through graphic design.