



(Copied from the web) UTRGV Assistant Professor Raheleh Filsoofi is shown before the opening of "FOLD" exhibition "2," located in the Visual Arts Gallery in the Visual Arts Annex on the Edinburg campus. Sydni D. Salinas/The Rider

A woman who inspires

By Bill Ritchie, retired professor of printmaking

I found a kindred person in Raheleh Filsoofi, an art teacher who came from Iran and, in April 2020, described why she was prepared for the pandemic shutdown at her art school. She wrote, "We need to develop survival skills, both personally and professionally. Luckily, as teachers, we have honed flexibility and adaptability, and as artists, we create and innovate. We should try our best not to panic.

"This might seem like a very strange perspective given the times, but life has taught me that personal, social, political, natural, or professional disasters may be just around the corner, waiting to appear when you least expect them. Faced with adversity, I have learned to reflect, select, revise, edit, and most of all, keep moving forward. As an Iranian-American, having interruptions to my education has been more the norm than the exception."

Her life in Iran was horrific compared to mine, and she was born in the mid-1970s, a few years before the Iran-Iraq war started. From pre-school on, her education was spent under siege, sheltered in basements and dodging war. By 2002 she was able to move to the USA, only to find anti-Iranian sentiment prevented a normal life for her.

At the time she was a little girl I was struggling with my own little crisis, but it was nothing by comparison to hers. Where she was in danger of injury and death, I was fighting campus politics and trying to expand printmaking teaching beyond traditions. The faculty was against it every step of the way.

As Raheleh put it, “*As an Iranian-American, having interruptions to my education has been more the norm than the exception.*” Me, I was a young hire. I had it easy by comparison. She learned she had to be careful at every step.

“I learned that no matter how determined one is, things do not always turn out the way we want or imagine. To pursue a dream, one must know how to improvise and how to act in the time of crisis.”

She put her article on the *Hyperallergic* blog at a time with the virus pandemic shut her out of the ceramics workshops - another crisis. Her article is about innovation. When she wrote her syllabus, it was “... *with the ever-present thought of the unexpected.*”

It got worse when a medical crisis came along. She adapted. Maybe it was her field – ceramics – that was part of her endowment for survival. She wrote:

“These events have helped me to examine my discipline from a wider perspective. Teaching art, especially ceramics, is a multifaceted practice that lies somewhere between art, science, history, anthropology, and psychology. A complex and layered pedagogical method is required to work with students from various backgrounds and of different skill levels. Teaching ceramics is more than techniques. I’ve made sure that students understand reading, writing, and research are integral parts of my pedagogy. Encouraging students to invest time outside of class has had many advantages. They’ve taken ownership of their learning while gaining knowledge — a win-win situation.”

When I read her words, I knew I had to keep her article at hand. Ceramics, like printmaking, is multifaceted. I could substitute the word *printmaking* for *ceramics* in her paragraph and it would still ring true.

The pressures of teaching and doing her own work increased until, in October 2019:

“... my career as an artist took a different path. ... Traditional hands-on or face-to-face instruction became a challenge. ... I decided to explore the possibility of teaching an online ceramics course.”

By this year, 2020, I have been out of institutional teaching for thirty-five years! But I never left teaching and making art. When I read her story, it was like my old dream coming true: *Teach printmaking online*. Since 1980, when I saw firsthand how the university hospital doctors were teaching at a distance by sending surgical demonstrations via microwave video from Seattle to Alaska.

With this, I figured I could teach printmaking, too; but as I said, the faculty wouldn’t have it. They were afraid distance learning was a Pandora’s box and might cause a decline in enrollment of FTE numbers, the full-time, resident students.

I stayed on course; I took my students out of the art building, to TV studios in the UW Hospital for video art, to the computing centers to try computer graphics. I took my classes to the rare book collection to see artists’ books. I expanded printmaking as far as I could.

Then, one day, the axe fell, and I left. That was in 1985. Ten years later, the Internet opened up and the World Wide Web was here – my new universe.

Printmaking is the ancestor of all human concept of sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Without fast, easy, and cheap ways to make an image (as printmaking began with handprints on the walls of caves), our world would not be where it is now.

For better or worse, mechanization takes command. Printmaking, in fact, *is* a Pandora's box; however, as I understand the legend of the sculptor and Pandora's box – the gift of the Gods - not all the worlds' miseries escaped before the lid was slammed shut.

What remained in the box was *hope*.

I am grateful for Raheleh's article, and I wish her well. I'm saving this essay and continuing with my plan to make a teaching method of printmaking suitable for college-level printmaking in lessons deliverable in part online.

This will not be a substitute for traditional printmaking studios any more than Raheleh's innovations are substitute for ceramics shops are, but in a time when STEM needs the "A" of art, printmaking is ideal as a starting point, a new paradigm, a structure for collaboration and an insurance policy for hope for printmaking teachers.

Read her words again, closely, and one finds she has used benefits of online experiences that would probably have lain dormant and forgotten, overlooked like lost jewels had it not been for her ability to rise above crises and survive.

What a valuable lesson she's teaching!

Original

[Teaching Art From a Distance Could Have Benefits](#)

Faced with adversity, I have learned to keep moving forward. As an Iranian-American, having interruptions to my education has been more the norm than the exception. Ever since, I have kept up with technologies that might enable my dream. It's not only the computers and videos I'm thinking about, but novel approaches to pedagogy such as gamification. Think how many college-age people today spent time on videogames.

By Raheleh Filsoofi, March 25, 2020

Caption: Raheleh Filsoofi and Erica Smith: One of one instruction – attention outside of the classroom (photo by by Adilene Rosales)

In the age of COVID-19, we need to develop survival skills, both personally and professionally. Luckily, as teachers, we have honed flexibility and adaptability, and as artists, we create and innovate. We should try our best not to panic. This might seem like a very strange perspective given the times, but life has taught me that personal, social, political, natural, or professional disasters may be just around the corner, waiting to appear when you least expect them. Faced with adversity, I have learned to reflect, select, revise, edit, and most of all, keep moving forward.

As an Iranian-American, having interruptions to my education has been more the norm than the exception. In 1979, Iran experienced the Islamic Revolution; though still quite young, I was aware of disruption and strife in my surroundings. The Iranian Cultural Revolution quickly followed, causing universities to close for three years in order to “purify” the educational system and make it consistent with Islamic beliefs and practices. So many books and topics were banned; several students and faculty never returned to universities or were dismissed. The war between Iraq and Iran broke out in 1980. My first day of pre-school was one day after the war began. When my older sister came to pick me up on that first afternoon, what should have been the sweet taste of learning was mixed with the bitter taste of fear. She held me tightly and we ran all the way down the road to home. A journey that would usually take us 40 minutes took us half the time.

The following years were filled with the sound of sirens and doing our homework in basements and shelters. After the war, other social and political events created other interruptions. I will never forget the student uprising in 1999, and its aftermath. Students who had protested were barred from returning to university. Religious events, such as Ramadan or Ashura, paused our education any time they overlapped with the school calendar. The unexpected death of the religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989, plunged the country into 40 days of required mourning, just before spring semester final exams.

After moving to the United States in November 2002, things did not get immediately better. The events of 9/11 and my Iranian citizenship complicated my immigration status. I did not have permission to work or study for five years. During that time, my dream of going to school seemed elusive. After I finally got my green card, I worked to save money for school. All these experiences made me mindful and cautious during every step of my life. I learned that no matter how determined one is, things do not always turn out the way we want or imagine. To pursue a dream, one must know how to improvise and how to act in the time of crisis.

When I finally landed my position as an assistant professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) in 2016, I got the chance to put my own syllabus and assignments together. I composed them with the ever-present thought of the unexpected. In the midst of establishing myself as a new faculty member during the first semester, I was confronted with a serious health issue and had to revise my syllabus and the assignments. Though I delayed surgery until after the semester, the sudden medical situation made me consider how I had to adapt and how my students might need to adapt given the same circumstance.

Caption: Adilene Rosales working on a project outside of class time (all images courtesy the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

These events have helped me to examine my discipline from a wider perspective. Teaching art, especially ceramics, is a multifaceted practice that lies somewhere between art, science, history, anthropology, and psychology. A complex and layered pedagogical method is required to work with students from various backgrounds and of different skill levels. Teaching ceramics is more than techniques. I’ve made sure that students understand reading, writing, and research are integral parts of my pedagogy. Encouraging students to invest time outside of class has had many advantages. They’ve taken ownership of their learning while gaining knowledge — a win-win situation.

Here are a few strategies I use to keep students engaged and active outside of the classroom. These benefit students, but also allow teachers to observe and chart their students' progress.

Blogs

My students are urged to read, write, and reflect through a blog that they then share with their peers and give each other feedback. These blogs have provided a way of giving constructive criticism and monitoring progress throughout the semester. This method is also indispensable for facilitating development in undergraduate students who, after graduation, can turn their blogs into research-based websites.

Today, as we prepare for distance teaching, I can guide students in enhancing their research through their blogs and provide them with ongoing evaluations.

Community Engagement

Empty Bowls community event: One of the most important aspects of my pedagogy is community service and outreach. While this is something we typically do in physical communities, it's still possible to do online.

Here are five examples of community service and engagement through distance learning (can select one or two):

- * Create a video or post on social media about the Empty Bowls, an artist-run organization to feed the hungry. Bring awareness about the mission of the organization to friends and your community.

- * Create a list of the active organizations that promote and support artists, such Artaxis and the Color Network. Create a post or video to promote and support them.

- * Invite a friend for an online art conversation. It can be between 15 and 30 minutes. The topics can vary: basic introduction to ceramics, introduction to a favorite artist, or discussion of a specific artwork.

- * Invite a family member to make a small project together. (It can be a pinch pot, if clay is available.)

- * Select a technique (it can be any method of making, like ceramic surface decoration) and practice it on your own. Make a small sample and share it on your blog (such as through a simple video presentation) or on any platform that your class is using at this time.

Teaching Online: An online open studio on Saturday, March 21

In October 2019, my career as an artist took a different path. I faced the difficulty of balancing my teaching responsibilities and my artistic endeavors. Traditional hands-on or face-to-face instruction became a challenge. What happened if I missed some of my classes? I decided to explore the possibility of teaching an online ceramics course. Many of my colleagues and fellow ceramic artists thought this was crazy and would not work. Nevertheless, I started to develop an undergraduate course, “Ceramics Practice Throughout History,” for art majors and non-art majors for the upcoming summer of 2020. This online course is a continuation of what we do in the studio, in face-to-face instruction, and in interactions with students. Guest lecturers will provide opportunities for students to engage with other artists. Demonstrations of techniques, open studio days, and individual and group critiques will be done virtually. Teleconferencing will allow for flexibility in office hours and increase interactions with students.

At the time I began to develop the course, I did not know that within a few months this would be the norm for instruction. Some of the materials I prepared in development for that course will be also used in the upcoming weeks.

Caption: Student Daniella Guevara’s class demonstration on a “mocha diffusion” technique (photo by Raja Yeazji Ayoubi)

During the past few years, I have encouraged my students to come and work at the ceramic studio during the weekends (this is in addition to the studio hours during the week). Since fall of 2017, Saturdays have become the day that most of the students were able to use the studio, and so I made myself available in case they needed me. Sometimes, we ended up discussing subjects that had nothing to do with ceramics as we were developing art, loading or firing the kiln, or sharing food in between tasks.

To keep the tradition alive, this past Saturday I invited my students for an online open studio — I wanted them to know that I am still available and the community we have built together is active. It was great to see and hear them. A few of the students expressed their frustration and some remained encouraging and positive. It was a friendly and intimate experience that we all seemed to enjoy. I’m happy that I could show them my avocado trees and my beautiful Haft-sin set up for the Iranian New Year. I enjoyed getting to see their favorite objects, dogs, birds, and plants.

Caption: Keeping the tradition alive, a screen grab of the Saturday online open studio

Behind the scenes, all faculty are working hard to find the best solution to the current situation, but I strongly believe that it is our job to remain positive, energetic, and excited in such a difficult time. We need to learn from this experience and use it to find a way to move forward with our teaching methodology and pedagogy. We need to reflect, select, revise, and edit, while moving forward.

Distance learning could serve our educational system and benefit our practice tremendously. Please do not get me wrong. I am a social practice artist and my number one priority is community engagement. I believe there is nothing more important than face-to-face and hands-on instruction with students. I also believe that we artists have the potential to revolutionize and humanize the distance learning system and make a great example to other disciplines. Through this system we can make amazing communities that meet, connect, and network. Distance learning must have the essential element of community. Now is the best time to actually become closer to your students, through texts, through emails, through FaceTime. Distance learning is not about technology. It is about the human experience and reminding us of our desire for connectivity and the security that we are all in this together.