

Integrative Teaching and Learning

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Discipline and Practice (Formally Known as Hard and Soft Skills)

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By experiencing the many binary expressions and terms presented in the learning arena, the world begins to appear linear and opposite. This is contrary to the way art students are asked to create and process their ideas. An art student in higher learning has the charge of taking risks and seeing the world beyond our commodity driven end point, deconstructing the standard of “teaching to the test” or teaching to the finished artwork.

The idea of *Hard and Soft* skills implies the absence of all those skills that fall in-between. However, rather than thinking of this in-between as linear, it is better to think of these as orbital worlds that circle around, move outside, and intersect. In deconstructing *Hard and Soft*, and by turning the whole idea inside-out, the attention is redirected to the center of a new orb of ideas. Skills therefore begin in the center; between hard and soft, between touch and feel, between cerebral and physical, qualitative and quantitative.

A conceptual model of these skills that integrate across the spectrum begins with placing *Discipline* and *Practice* at either pole of the planetary visual, and with *Rigor*, *Time*, and *Process* becoming the revolving nucleus (see Figure 3). These five elements each have a mirrored identity as both skills and issues with incoming art students. Teaching these can be truly daunting; therefore the model becomes not teaching to the issues, but integrative teaching that incorporates the lessons that open doors to the skills, and in turn (and with much hope) a secondary effect of risk-taking without fear follows.

Educators also model in their pedagogical technique the same traits and skills that are requested of the student – a non-linear path of untethered creativity, more analogous to the three-dimensional orbital planetary body—constantly moving—than a two-dimensional straight ruler.

Two ideas now come to the forefront: teaching to the process, and de-emphasizing the importance of a finished product. Teaching to the process will in turn create an environment of critical dialogue surrounded by risk-taking, mindful creativity, and integrity in work (noun and verb). De-emphasizing the importance of the finished product will break down the linear approach that so many foundation students arrive with; and with luck this will enable them to appreciate their newfound engagement, struggle, rigor, and editing processes within their work. A re-creation begins as new ideas are formed.

Pragmatically, an art student will begin to work with intent, decrease the need for procrastination, and enjoy the process. This is where it begins: to emphasize the process the process itself must be assessed in the academic setting. Not that the outcome is left outside of the realm of importance, but that the outcome and process become equally important. An assessment is possible through myriad ways, but adding a documentation-of-process factor might be a good place to start. This can be as simple as establishing time intervals for students to pause in what they are doing, and document with writing, thumbnail drawings, photography and/or video imaging. If the students are working on a class assignment, then the documentation interval might be every twenty minutes.

If the importance of a *finished product* is removed from the equation, then the possibility increases that the student will become open to risk-taking. Here, a different concept of time may become an important factor in art production. If the idea of time being non-linear is allowed into the discussion—or as Walter Benjamin suggested, a constellation of events beyond the narrative explanations found in history books—then the assessment process might also separate itself from attributes such as hard deadlines or finished work.¹

If each project were assessed according to rigor of process with an indefinite outcome, qualitatively the work would become more involved and rewarding. To do this the solution might be to replace the conclusive “final” with a more temporal idea – to assess the place the student has arrived in their work during the last critique of the project, knowing that a continuum of work may be justifiable. How the work has come together or how the process has informed the work at this point will define a sense of the work being complete, but not necessarily finished (as a gallery director might define it).

What direction might the student take to make the work more complete or even “finished,” if desired? Finality becomes open to possibilities as defined by the student at a later moment. Is a professional, finished artwork an important goal for a first year student? (Many works may be considered studies at this point, and others completed for a portfolio as the student chooses.) The finishing of a work may even become a final project for the course. Using the final critique as a place of final opportunity to discuss what one might do next versus a place of defined finality relinquishes the need for a linear process; but as the assessment at that time falls onto ideas of completeness, it may also create a desire for the student to reach that point on their own.

And if the work is also assessed during the process for risk-taking and creativity (versus finality) other skills may evolve such as time management, self-assessment, risk-taking, and a redefining of the original idea through mindfulness and research. There is a greater chance to develop a love for learning and creating than the final right answer. This love of learning is central to the transformational outcomes of integrative teaching and learning.

Of course, this is a basic model for many richer possibilities of non-linear thinking. Other great “soft skill” ideas and important skill-factors play into this creative whirlwind such as integrity, empathy for the collective mind, liminal places, ambiguity, play, collaboration, and connectivity—only a sample of the many possibilities.

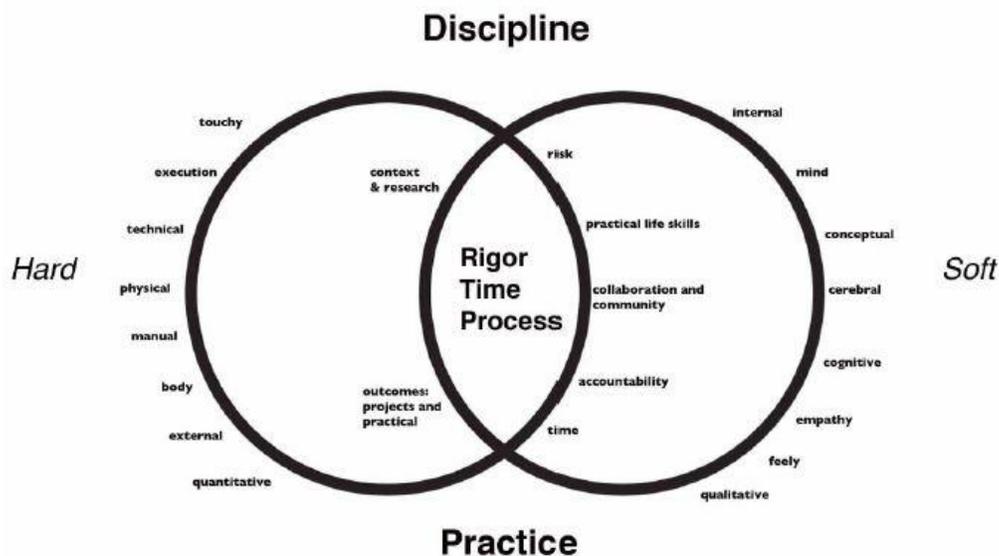


Figure 3 Integrative Teaching and Learning, Hard and Soft Skills or Discipline and Practice

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 462- 463.