

It is 8:28 a.m. Two female students, sketch pads in hand, wait patiently outside their locked classroom waiting for someone to let them in for their 8:30 class in intermediate drawing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. The instructor, Charlene Teters, arrives a moment later, sizes up the situation and gets someone to unlock the door. More students straggle in, some looking for the class sign-up sheet, which Teters hasn't put out yet and others just waiting for class to begin.



Easels are scattered about the room and Teters asks the eight students to place them in a row and put their homework assignments on them. The work in place, the students set up a row of chairs directly across from the easels and Teters asks them to write a critique of their own work and a peer review of the drawing to the right of theirs.

As the students write, Teters, dressed in a blue T-shirt, a blue vest with "Penn State" on it, faded blue jeans and plaid sneakers, walks casually in front of the easels examining each drawing and then returns to her original position to the right of the drawings and to the left of her students. She leaves the room for a minute, returning with a pencil and a handful of green paper on which she will write notes as her students offer their reviews.

Teters is the instructor for Drawing II, which meets twice a week for three hours in a studio. Everything in the syllabus makes it clear the course will increase or expand skills and knowledge students acquired in Drawing I, another course Teters teaches. And the syllabus includes a page giving the IAIA's policy on unexcused absences or tardiness. Don't miss, don't be late. One of nine students is missing today and two arrived within the five-minute grace period.

Charlene Teters, a member of the Spokane tribe, has been a professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts since 1997, but her affiliation with the institute began in the mid-1980s when she received an associate of fine arts degree then went on to obtain a bachelor's of fine arts degree in painting from the College of Santa Fe in 1988 and a master of fine arts from the University of Illinois in 1994. In fact, it was at the University of Illinois where her activism against the abusive use of sports team mascots became a national story that was recently retold in a documentary titled "In Whose Honor?"

Teters is also a well known artist, with at least 10 individual and 13 group exhibitions to her credit, with more scheduled in the months ahead. She traces her interest in art to her late father, a bartender in

Spokane, Washington, who painted and created in woodwork every chance he could, but never made a living at it.

“I used to kind of hang on everything he did,” Teters says. “He was always making things, so that was probably an early introduction for me.”

But when she told her father she wanted to be an artist, she recalls his response: “Oh, Char, please. Not an artist. Be something else. Be a nurse. A teacher. Be something other than an artist.” Teters did consider a career in nursing, but her father died just as she was graduating from high school and with two sisters and three brothers in the house, going anywhere was out of the question.

While she lived in Washington, mostly as a homemaker, she also painted. She recalls stacking little paintings behind the door and giving them to anyone who would ask. One of those paintings was of “Big Mom,” the writer Sherman Alexie’s grandmother. Teters returns to Spokane every September for Pow Wow, and her cousin, who has the painting of Big Mom, says: “I think about you every day.”

Right now, though, Teters is trying to get her students to do some in-depth thinking. She has listened to various self-criticisms and peer reviews and for each one has asked questions to draw out her students’ responses. More often than not she will ask of each drawing where the students think the focus is. One soft-spoken student walks up to a drawing and points to the area, which she says “kind of leads you in.”



When it’s the soft-spoken student’s turn to discuss her own work, she says: “I’m happy with it.” Teters won’t let her off the hook and asks: “Are there any areas that work better than others?” The follow-up questions continue throughout the class. When they’re met with silence on the third drawing, Teters, frustrated, gets stern, although she never raises her voice.

“I shouldn’t have to coax it out of you,” she says. She points out that this is the second drawing class the students have taken and they should be familiar with the vocabulary of criticism and know how to evaluate a drawing.

Deconstruct it, she tells them. What works? What do you like? What doesn’t work? What don’t you like? She keeps pushing the students to dig deeper. Why? Explain. Teters knows that if the students can’t evaluate drawings, they won’t be able to critique their own work and become better.

Self-criticism is one of the tenets on which Teters has developed her teaching philosophy. Some teachers rely on models; Teters draws with her students and invites their criticism. She then criticizes her own work and tells the students what she would do to make a drawing or painting better.

“I talk through it,” she says. “Sometimes it can be a horrible, big mess. And I think, ‘Why did I do that?’ But I talk through it.” She wants students to see her struggle with something. “It’s important,” she says, “for students to see you (the teacher) constantly growing.”

And while Teters will say that most of what she does is teach technique, she must still show them the path to their creative side.

“Drawing is about learning to see,” she tells the class as a continuation of her lecture on how to evaluate. She advises her students to draw what they see, not what they think. “We all think of an apple as red so we draw it that way,” she explains. “But apples can be red, green and brown and the artist needs to look at the different colors and then draw what he sees.”

For the next student drawing, Teters asks the class to tell her what the focal point is. Not happy with the response, she says: “You guys are too nice” and then turns to the student and tells him the drawing is boring and more typical of something that would be done in the beginning class and “doesn’t represent the skills you have.” She politely chastises the student for not having done the assignment she outlined a week ago (make smaller drawings first, something akin to drafts in writing).

Another student says in his self-critique that his drawing is unfinished and after a comment or two from others, Teters, pointing out that the student did not put enough time into the work, moves on. It is the shortest session of the morning.

She spends more time with students who have put in the time or whose work shows promise. One student receives praise for experimenting and Teters even uses the word “courage” to describe the student’s approach. She ends that critique by telling the student she did a really good job.

A student who has turned in a two-tone drawing (the one tone being the paper on which the drawing was made) first hears how to make a drawing of multiple tones (draw one spot darkest, one spot lightest, and all others of in-between tones) and is then told she’s timid and afraid to struggle. “Go forward,” Teters tell her. “Don’t run away from struggle. Go to it.”

Teters does not run away from the struggle. She faced it head-on as one of only three Native Americans at the University of Illinois, whose mascot, Chief Illiniwek, Teters saw as a racist and dehumanizing stereotype. She was able to get the university to modify (but not discontinue) its use of the mascot. She is now in her 11th year on the

board of directors of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media and is happy to say that the group is making progress, much of it behind the scenes.

She is one of 10 Native Americans who will work with 10 Hispanics and 10 African-Americans in a leadership development program funded by the Kellogg Foundation and the Alliance for Equity in Education. She has a busy year of workshops ahead of her and two shows she needs to get ready for, one in Chicago and the other in New York.

And if her students think she's going to get easier, they needed only to ponder the next assignment. They have to draw white objects on a white background. They need to have many tones, a focal point—and they need to struggle.