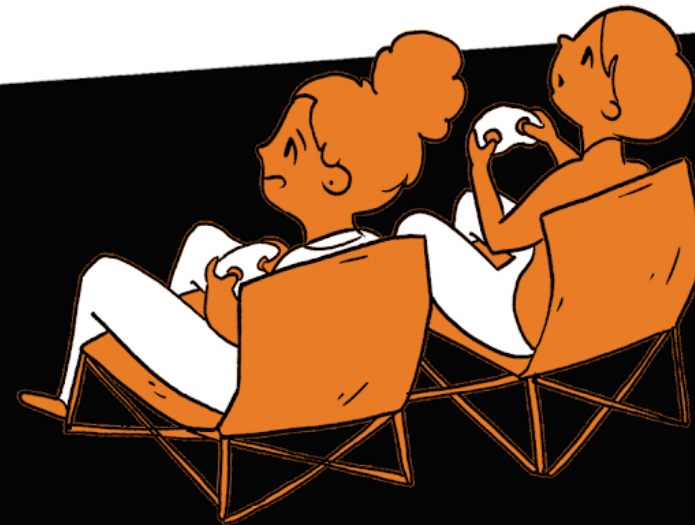


# Teaching Game Art: What Really Matters

Marcelo Viana Neto  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
[radicalplay.org](http://radicalplay.org)



INDIE  
CADE

A world map showing temperature anomalies. The map uses a color scale where blue indicates cooler than average and yellow/orange indicates warmer than average. Significant warming (yellow/orange) is visible across most of the globe, particularly in the mid and high latitudes. The year '1980' is printed at the bottom center. Overlaid on the map is the text 'Nothing, actually.' and 'The world is burning!' in large, bold, black font.

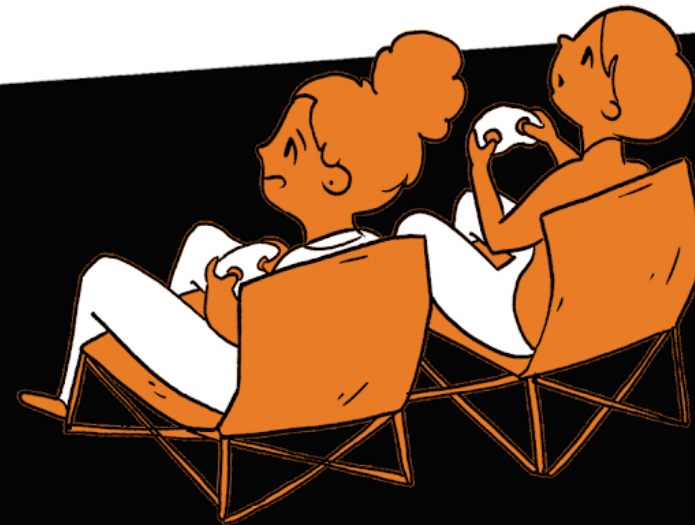
**Nothing, actually.**  
**The world is burning!**

1980



# Teaching Game Art: What Really Matters

Marcelo Viana Neto  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
[radicalplay.org](http://radicalplay.org)



INDIE  
CADE

*(really short)*

***Bio***

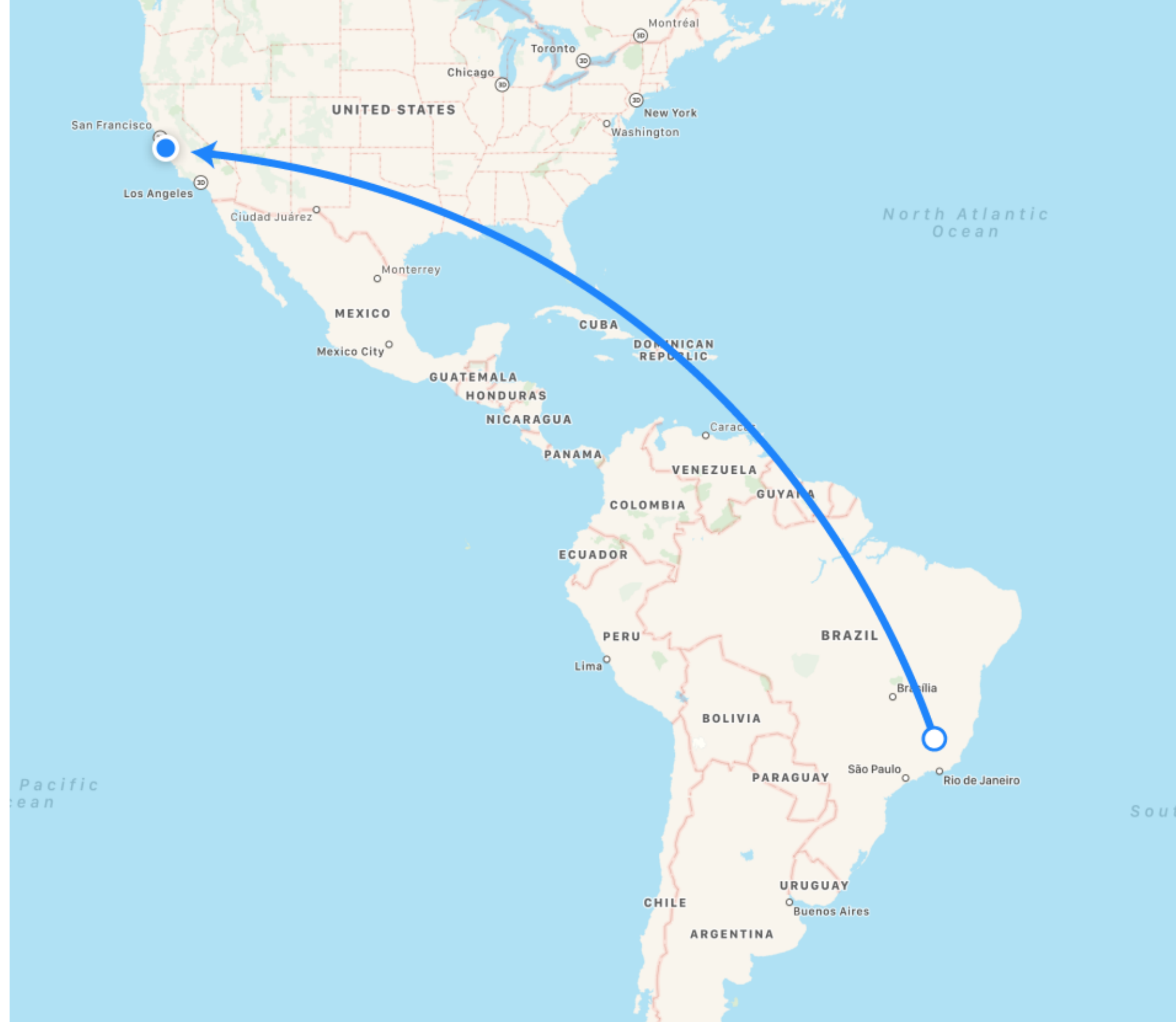


# Belo Horizonte, Brazil





2002





# Professional Background:

**1999–2010:** Web/Graphic Designer, Art Director

**2010–Present:** Game Designer, 3D Artist

**Currently:** Visiting Assistant Professor at UCSC in the  
Art & Design: Games and Playable Media program

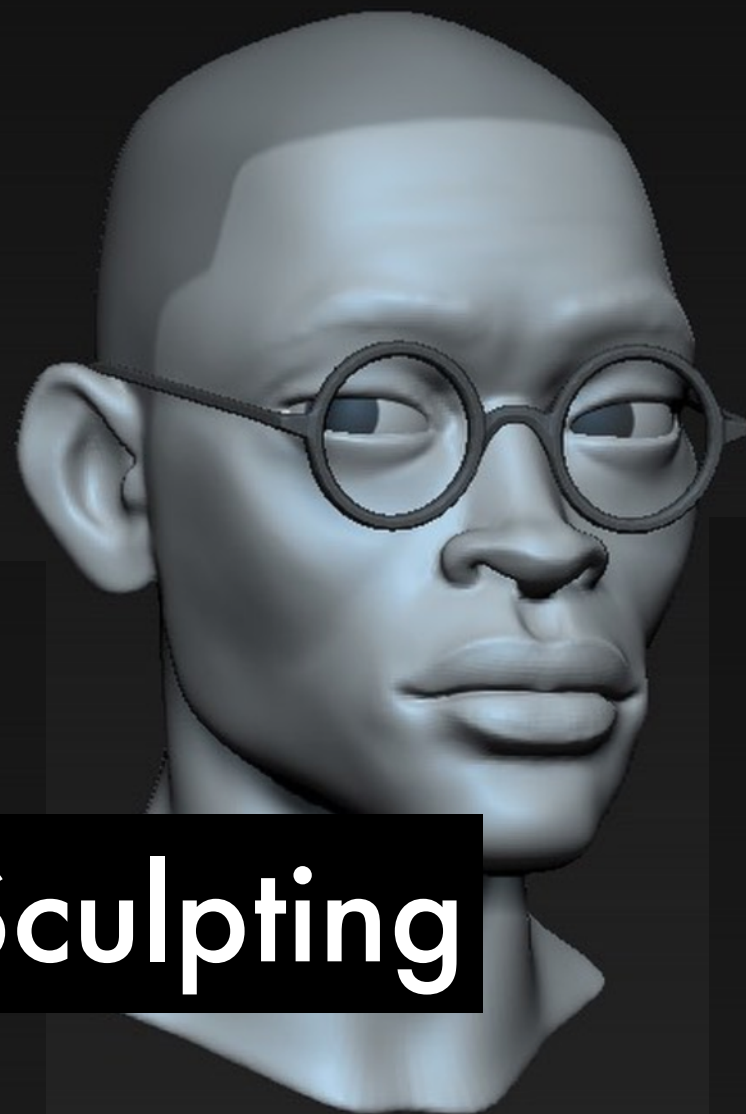




# Graphic Design + Game Design







# Digital Sculpting



A detailed 3D render of a treasure chest. The chest has a wooden body with visible grain and is reinforced with metal bands. It features a large metal latch on the right side and a keyhole on the left. The chest is set against a plain, light gray background.

# 3D Game Art Production





# Speculative Futures: Games for a Different World

In-game screenshot from **Ecopolis** by Annabel Maokhamphiou, Jacob Levine, and Margaret Patrick





# COSMOS

## California State Summer School for Science and Mathematics



***What this talk  
is about***

*My* approach seems to **work**.



“This class was OK.”

“Too political.”

“I hate Maya.”



*My* approach seems to **work**.

# Teaching Game Art: What **Really** Matters



What has worked **for me** and **my students**  
and I hope it will be of some value to you.

***What guides  
my teaching***



# Self-Determination Theory

Edward L. Deci & Richard Ryan

## 3 innate needs:

### Autonomy

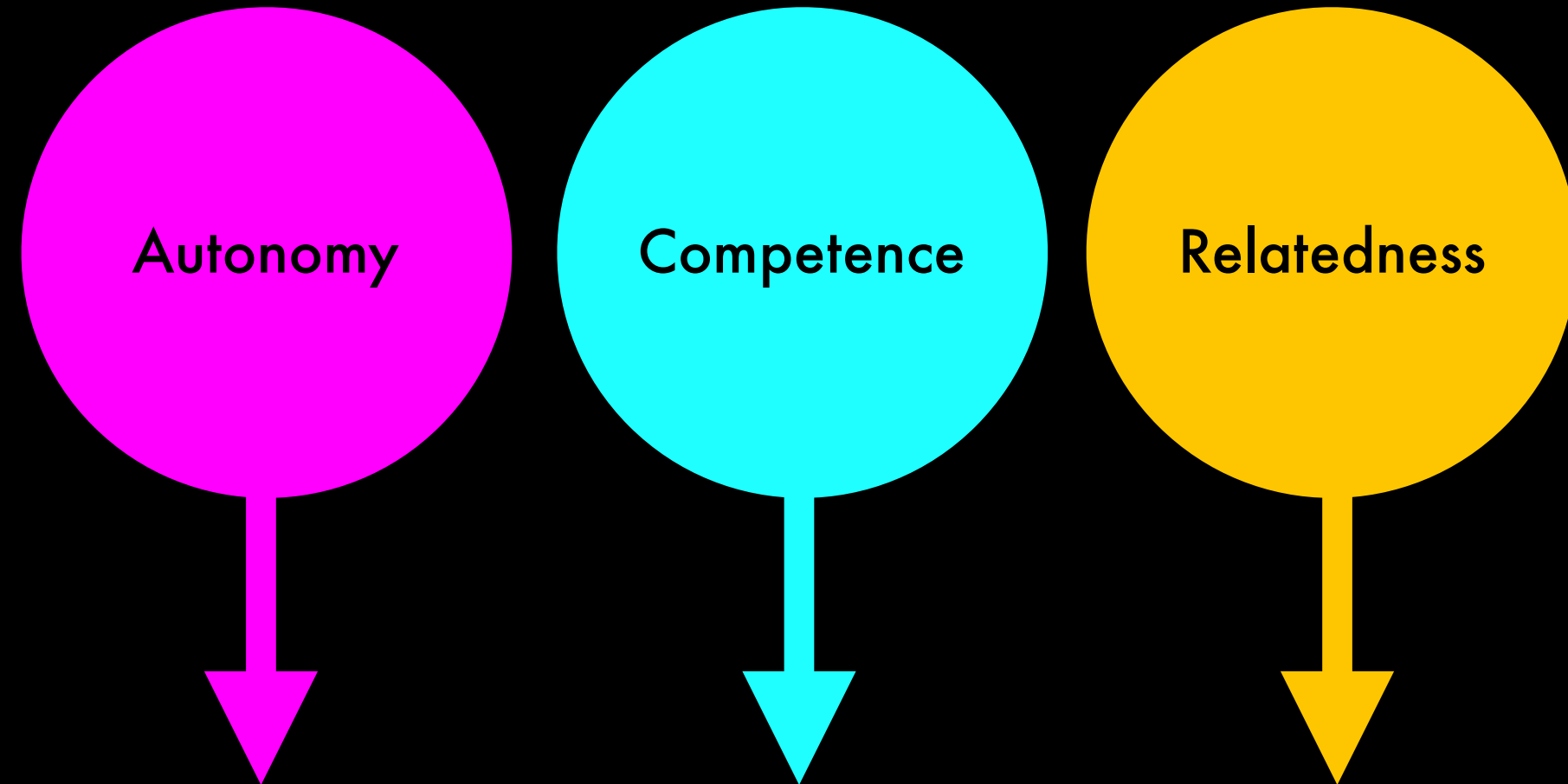
The inner endorsement  
of your own actions

### Competence

Effectiveness when  
dealing with the  
environment

### Relatedness

Close, affectionate  
relationships with  
others



**Engagement + Motivation**



SDT

+

Critical pedagogy

# *In the classroom:*

## **Autonomy**

Endorsement of  
proposed activities  
or control over them

## **Confidence**

Feeling of self-efficacy  
and comfort with tools,  
techniques, and  
context

## **Community**

Mentors and peers  
one can trust and  
relate to



# Autonomous

Self-motivated

Engaged

Feel challenged

Interests integrated

Makes decisions

# Traditional

Externally-motivated

Obedient

Feel directed

Interests unknown

Responds to requests

1. Developing a creative **practice**
2. **Craft** does matter
3. Training **art directors**
4. **Connecting** at eye-level
5. Fostering a creative **community**



**1.**

**Developing a creative practice  
is more important than mastering  
tools and techniques.**

The **#1 focus** of my art courses is to help each student understand their **individual process** and develop a sustainable, healthy relationship with work.

I think we tend to **take it for granted** that students will figure out their process, eventually.



We teach them how to make art, how to think about art, and that practice stuff is **on them**.

Learn how to make good work



Get good at making work consistently

But many students **struggle** to learn skills and produce work because they haven't developed a **sustained** practice yet.



Learn how to make good work



Get good at making work consistently

I think **we know this** but don't usually teach  
with it in mind.

Create a course structure that is **process-based** instead of results-based.

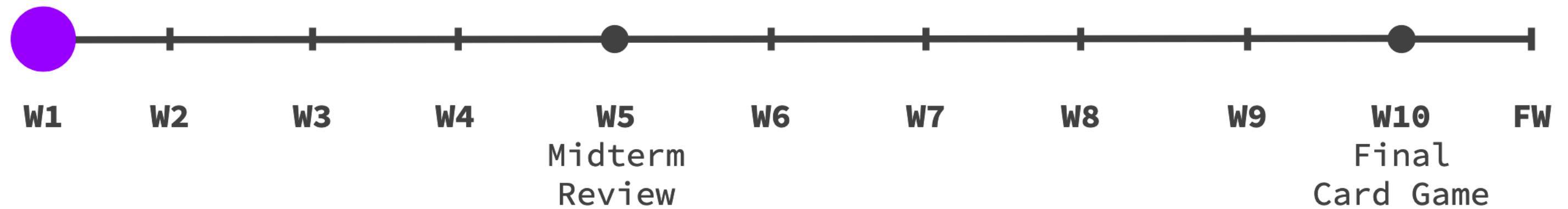


# Beginners need a lot of **structure**.

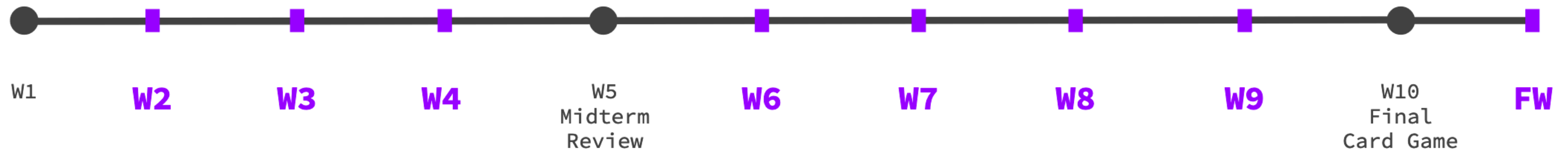
But we can't take all their agency away either.

(more on this later...)

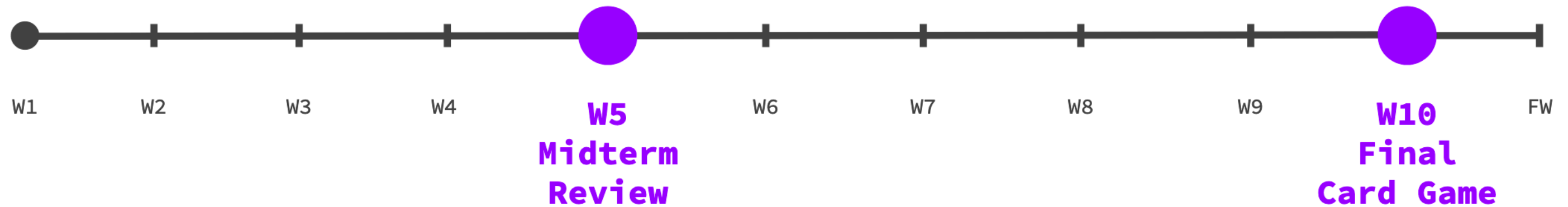
# Course Timeline:



**1 assignment due every week:**  
8 total



# Midterm Review + Final Submission





Intermediate and advanced students need **less structure and more agency.**

(more on this later...)

**Acknowledge that making art is f\*cking hard.**

Talk about **your** process, **your** struggles,  
the things **you** do in **your** life that help **you**  
make work.





**Productivity** can be a toxic word.

Instead, talk about developing a healthy **process**, managing **energy**, creating spaces for **focused work**.

Make this an **essential** part of your curriculum.

2.

**See your students as art directors,  
not craft specialists.**

Not every one of our students will make it...

Hopes &  
Dreams



Self-efficacy and leadership skills are **transferrable** to most positions and to life in the 21st century, generally.

These skills help them **adapt** to a fast-changing, dynamic media landscape.

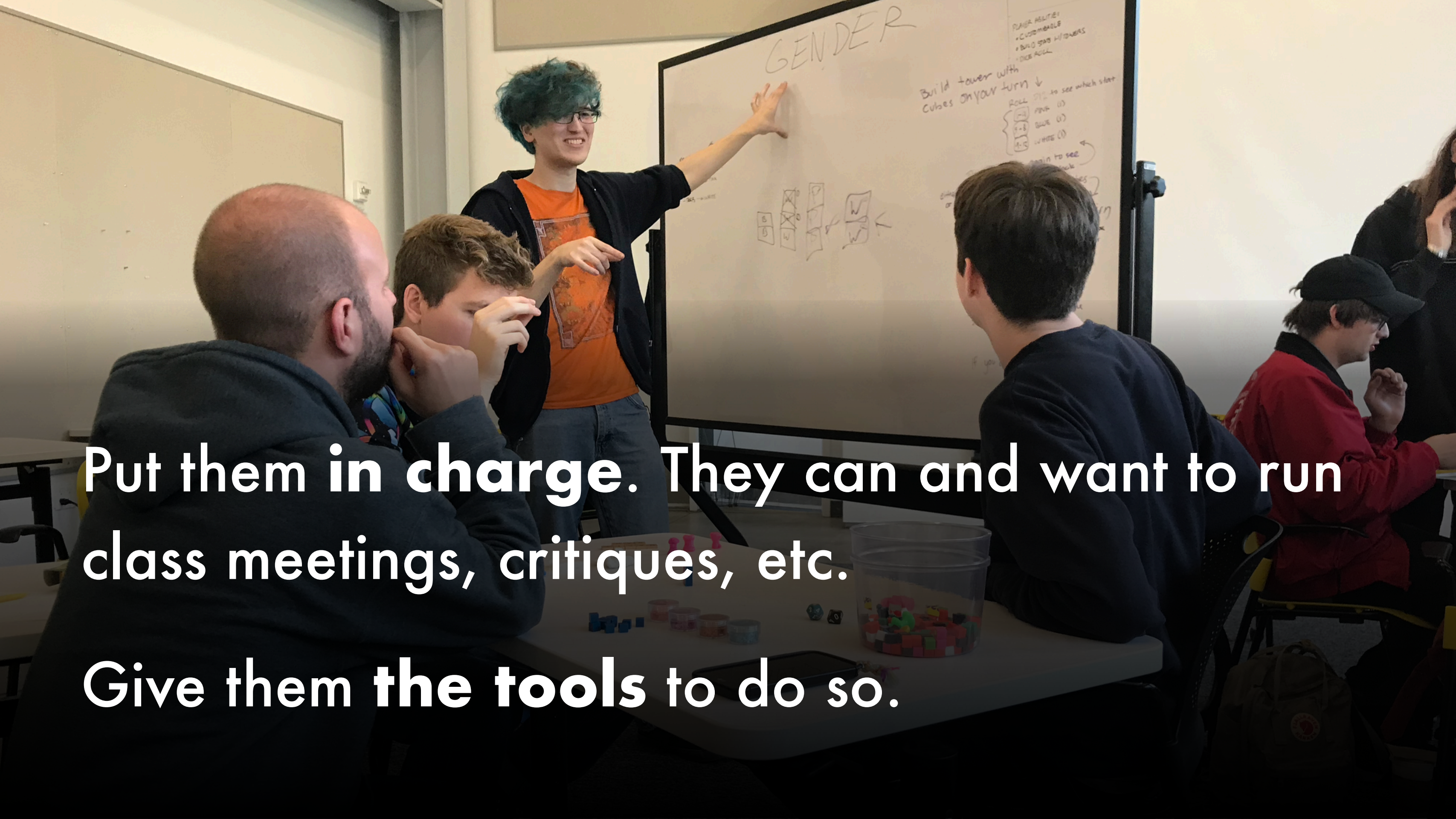
Specialized technical skills (e.g. UV unwrapping, retopology) are not easily transferrable and become **obsolete** fast.

But if they have a healthy practice, they can learn **The New Hot Thing** easily and will be excited to do so.



How?

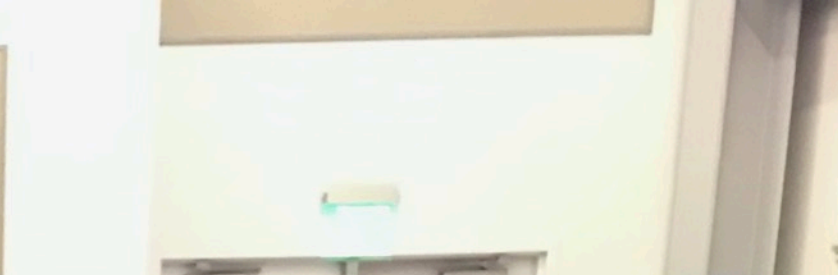




**Put them in charge. They can and want to run class meetings, critiques, etc.**

**Give them the tools to do so.**





Design low-stakes activities that ask them to see **the course itself** as part of their work.



**Open up** your process.

Revise the syllabus and assignments  
**with them.**

Ask for **feedback**, give them latitude  
to change the class itself.

**“Looking back on it, what we made is an incredible portfolio piece because it **puts ourselves (our opinions, thoughts and ideas) to the forefront of our work.**”**

**—Reshma Zachariah**



**“This was a class where I felt my opinions mattered.**  
In other classes the personal touch is more of an afterthought  
and the main study is focused on understanding a technology  
or an ideology.

Even in most writing and art classes I’ve taken, the focus is  
more on how to most convincingly argue an idea, **instead of**  
**what ideas you actually have.”**

—Roy Cramer

3.

**HOWEVER... Craft is *essential*.**





Without **competency** over tools and techniques, it's really difficult to develop a sense of **self-efficacy**.

Without a sense of self-efficacy, work is **unsustainable**.



The background is a complex, abstract pattern. It features a grid of small, rounded, and irregular shapes in various colors including orange, yellow, blue, green, and brown. These shapes are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some areas appearing more vibrant and others more muted. The overall effect is a rich, textured visual field.

Most ideas come out of the **process**, anyway.



**Leverage The Internet**

**Project-based learning is great**

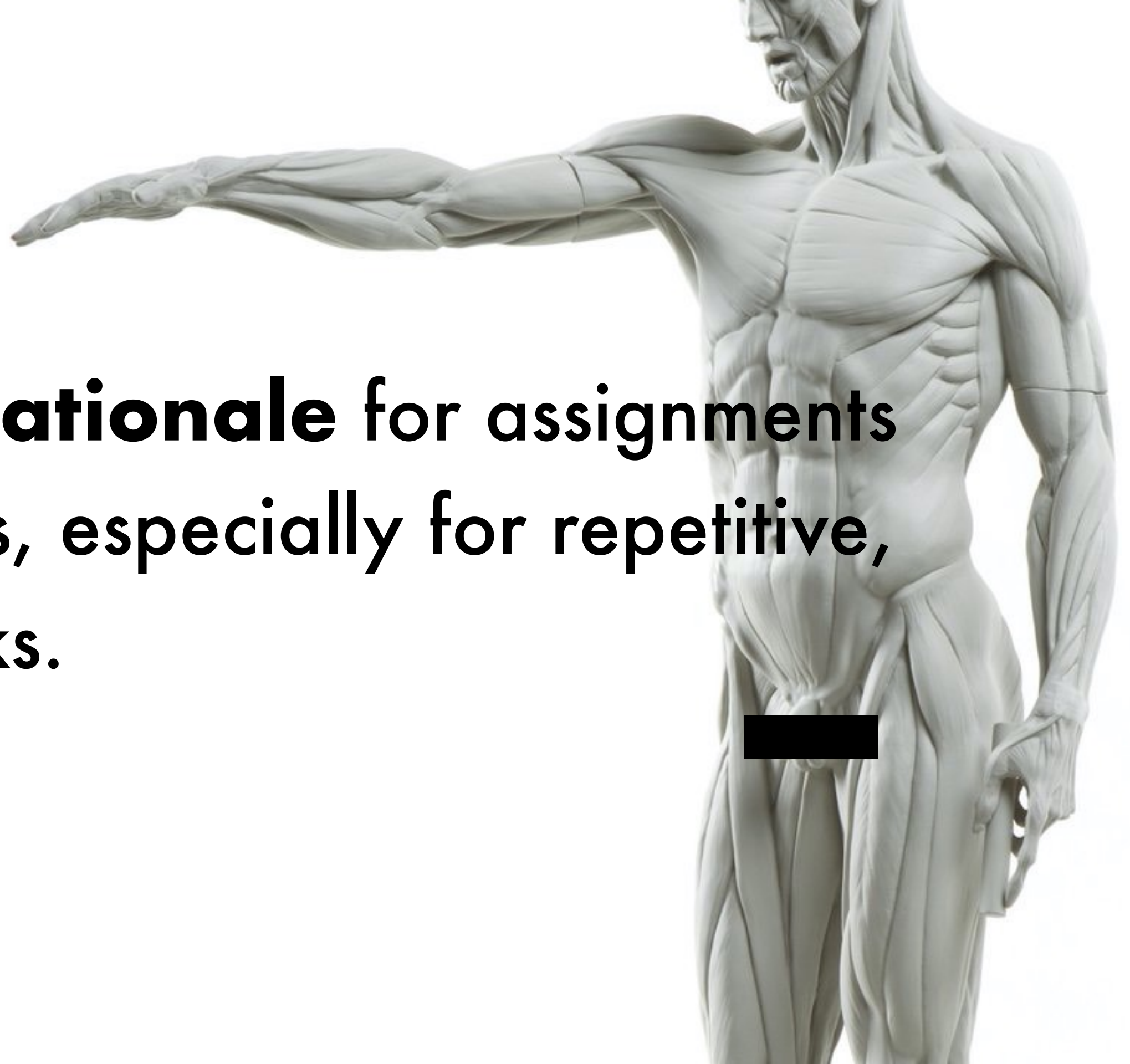
**Share resources**

**Peer-to-peer instruction also great**

**Value idiosyncrasies**

**etc.**

**Provide a rationale for assignments and exercises, especially for repetitive, “boring” tasks.**



Here, **extrinsic rewards** can actually help.



4.

Connect with your students at the  
**eye level, not from above.**

**Being admired, feeling heard and  
being in control** is intoxicating, but it can  
create dependency.

A pixelated, blue-toned illustration of a man with a wide, toothy grin and wild hair, holding a city skyline in his hands. The man's face is the central focus, with his eyes looking directly at the viewer. His hands are positioned on either side of his face, holding a city skyline that includes a prominent skyscraper. The background is dark, and the overall style is reminiscent of early computer graphics or video game sprites.

If they see you as their **boss, director, overlord**, they won't feel a sense of autonomy, and community is harder to build.

Compliance

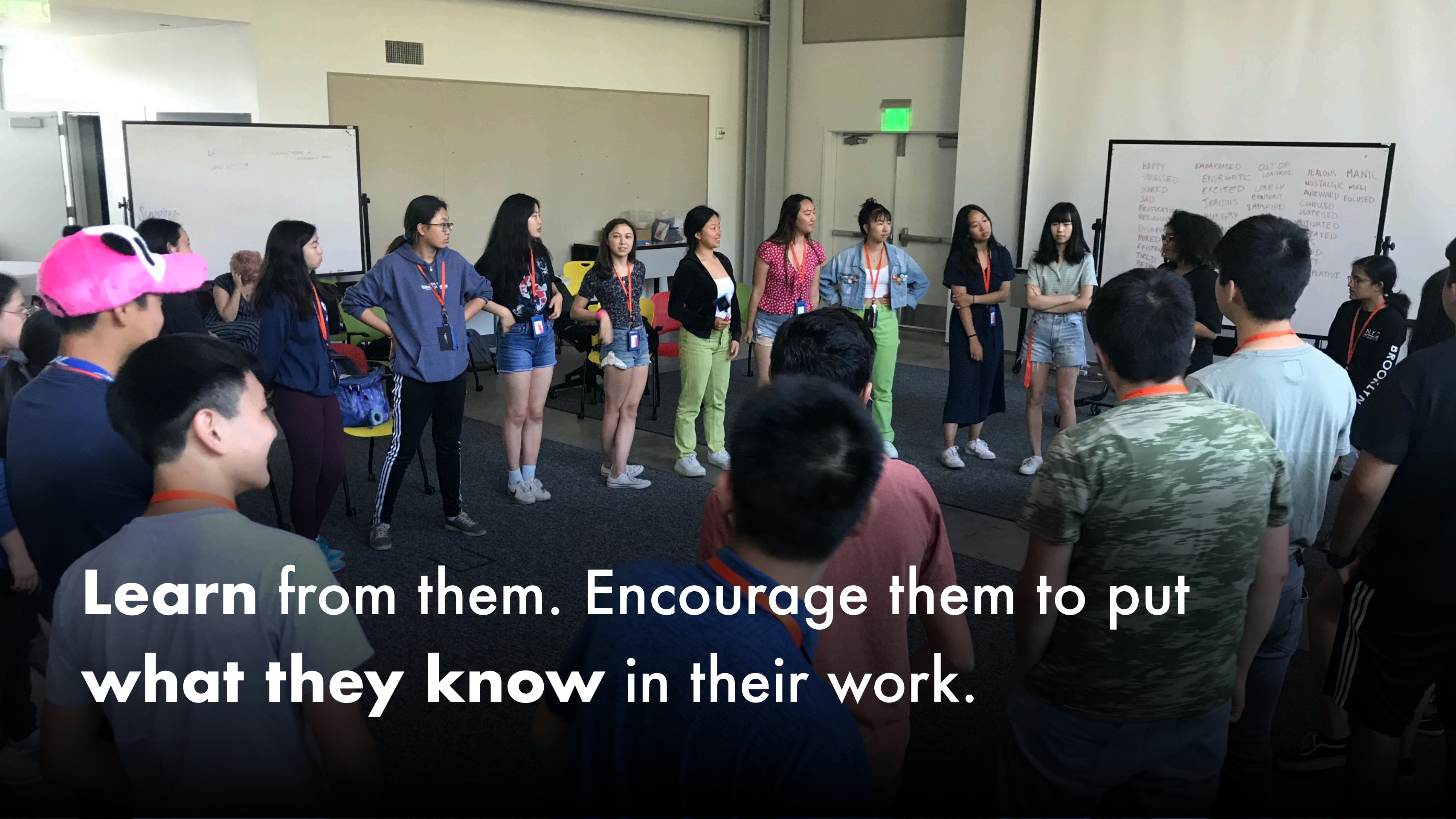
≠

Engagement



Their **culture** is important. Their **struggles**  
are unique. Their **backgrounds** rich.





HAPPY	EMBARRASSED	OUT OF CONTROL	JEALOUS	MANIC
STRESSED	ENERGETIC	LOVELY	NOSTALGIC	MELI
SHAKED	EXCITED	LOVELY	AWKWARD	FOCUSED
SAD	SEALOUS	SATISFIED	CONFUSED	
FRUSTRATED	HUNGRY		SURPRISED	
NERVOUS			ACTIVATED	
DISAPPOINTED			BEATEN	
BORED			SCARED	
EXISTENTIAL			TIRED	
TIED			RETIRE	
RETIRE				

**Learn from them. Encourage them to put what they know in their work.**



Trust is **hard** to build, *easy* to **shatter**.

5.

Foster a creative, inclusive, democratic  
**community.**



Artists **need** community to grow.

**Make this an *integral* part of your classes.**



# CLASS VALUES

COLLABORATION

OPEN-MINDEDNESS

RESPECT

CONSTRUCTIVE CRIT

OWNERSHIP OF MISTAKES

WILLINGNESS TO MENTOR

OPEN/INCLUSIVE ENV.

" COMM

JOY / SERIOUS FUN

CHALLENGE EACH OTHER

RADICAL

TAKE RISKS

EXPERIMENTATION

AWARENESS/RESPECT BG

UTILIZE STR.

GRATITUDE

FLEXIBILITY

WORK/LIFE BAL.



# CLASS VALUES

129-02  
SPEC FUTURES  
M

DON'T YOCK MY YUM

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

DBAD

ATTENTIVENESS

ASSUME GOOD FAITH

FUN / JOY

LOVE

ENCOURAGEMENT

WHOLESOMENESS

RESPECT SKILLS

NO SLURS

SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

WE'RE ALL LEARNING

FOLLOW THROUGH

REASONABLE GOALS

ASK FOR HELP

OPEN COMMUNICATION

EMPATHY

LIFE BE LIKE THAT

F.I.S.H.

TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

POSITIVITY

COMARADERIE

PATIENCE

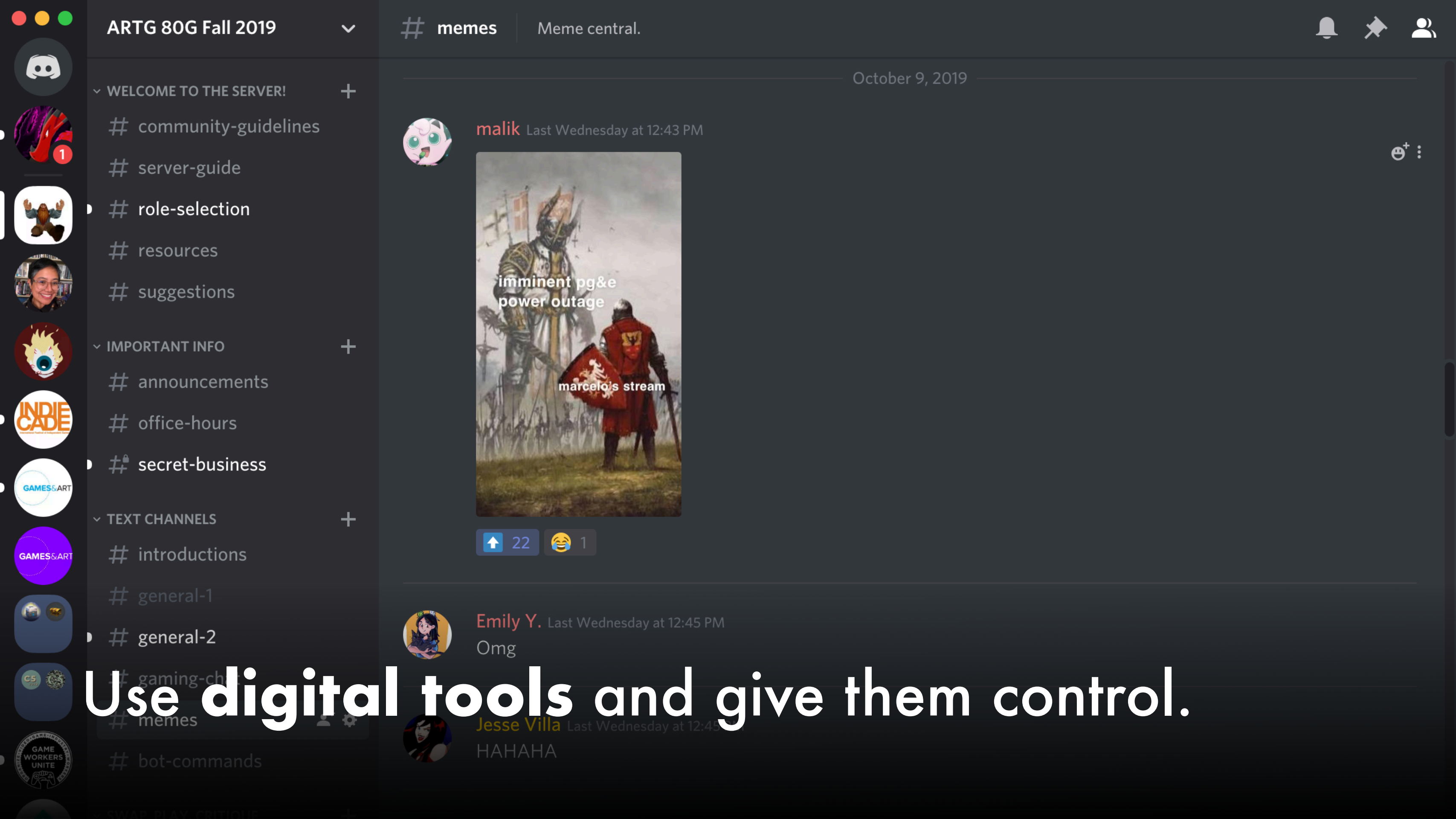
NO GRUDGES

SERIOUS FUN



Turn **critiques** into a safe, growth-focused environment, even when they have to be tough.

**Competition (without consent) poisons communities.**



ARTG 80G Fall 2019

# memes

Meme central.

October 9, 2019

WELCOME TO THE SERVER!

# community-guidelines

# server-guide

# role-selection

# resources

# suggestions

IMPORTANT INFO

# announcements

# office-hours

# secret-business

TEXT CHANNELS

# introductions

# general-1

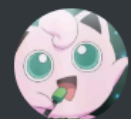
# general-2

# gaming-ch...

# memes

# bot-commands

SWAP PLAY CRITIQUE

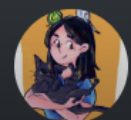


malik Last Wednesday at 12:43 PM



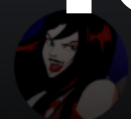
22

1



Emily Y. Last Wednesday at 12:45 PM

Omg



Jesse Villa Last Wednesday at 12:45 PM

HAHAHA

Use digital tools and give them control.

Turn *your* classroom into a **refuge**.





**Beautiful things will happen.**

**Thank you!**

**Marcelo Viana Neto**

**turistainc@gmail.com**

**mvn@ucsc.edu**

**Twitter/IG: @manyweare**