

## **Building Confidence in Artists:**

**from The Working Artist Mentorship Lab 2 March, 2025**

### **The Ephemeral Quality of Confidence**

Steven Sparling's provocative stance that "confidence doesn't really exist" challenges our fundamental understanding of confidence as a destination. After striving 50+ years to arrive at a place of consistent confidence, he concluded that we're chasing something inherently transient. This perspective shifts our focus from seeking a permanent state of confidence to understanding it as:

- A momentary experience rather than a fixed trait
- Something that naturally fluctuates throughout our careers and lives
- A practice rather than an achievement

### **The Physiological Understanding of Confidence**

Fear and excitement create identical physiological responses:

- Increased heart rate
- Stomach "butterflies" or "knots"
- Shortness of breath
- Heightened awareness
- Tension in muscles

This neurobiological understanding provides a powerful reframing opportunity. By recognizing that the physical sensations of "fear" and "excitement" are identical, artists can consciously reinterpret their pre-performance jitters or creative anxiety as positive activation energy rather than debilitating fear.

### **The Growth vs. Fixed Mindset Framework**

Confidence challenges connect directly to Carol Dweck's research on mindsets:

- Fixed mindset: Interprets challenges as threats to identity and proof of inadequacy
- Growth mindset: Views challenges as opportunities for development and expansion

Steven noted that seeing physical responses as "fear" or "incompetence" indicates a fixed mindset, while interpreting them as signs of stretching beyond normal patterns reflects a growth mindset. This framework provides a diagnostic tool for artists to identify when they're slipping into fixed-mindset thinking.

### **Acting Theory Applied to Confidence**

Drawing from Stanislavski's techniques, Steven offered a sophisticated approach to confidence-building through deliberate performance:

#### **Outside-In Method**

- Consciously adopt the physical characteristics of confidence
- Make eye contact, stand tall, speak with conviction
- The external behaviors gradually influence internal states

### **Inside-Out Method**

- Begin with the character's motivations and history
- Develop the inner emotional life that would drive confident behavior
- Allow the internal state to manifest in external behaviors

The "outside-in" approach may be particularly valuable for artists who struggle to access confident feelings naturally but can imitate confident behaviors.

### **The Faceted Self Concept**

Steven introduced the concept of the "faceted self" – the idea that we all contain multiple aspects of identity and personality. This model suggests:

- We already possess a "confident artist self" as one facet of our identity
- We can consciously choose to activate this facet of self
- Through practice, this facet becomes more accessible and integrated

## **Physiological Interventions**

The discussion of "superhero poses" and physical techniques has scientific grounding:

- Amy Cuddy's research on "power posing" demonstrates how physical positioning affects testosterone and cortisol levels
- The chimpanzee arm-raising exercise activates physical energy patterns that interrupt anxiety cycles
- These techniques provide concrete pre-performance rituals that artists can implement before important events (gallery meetings, submissions, public showings)

## **The Paradox of Artistic Judgment**

The conversation addressed the central paradox that artists face:

- We must maintain high standards to create meaningful work
- Yet excessive self-judgment paralyzes creative production
- This tension cannot be fully resolved but must be managed continually

## **Julia Cameron's Quantitative Approach**

Julia Cameron's insight that "you focus on quantity and give up judgment about quality to a higher power" provides a practical resolution to this paradox:

- Setting production goals (number of paintings, hours at the easel, etc.) rather than quality goals
- Creating regular creative habits that operate regardless of mood or inspiration
- Understanding that quality emerges organically from quantity, not from perfectionism

### **The 10,000 Hours Principle in Context**

Steven referenced the "10,000 hours" concept but framed it specifically around artistic development:

- Every skill has an "awkward teenage phase" of development
- Refusing to go through this phase prevents mastery
- Artists must produce substantial "bad art" as a necessary stepping stone to good art

### **Detachment from Outcomes**

A sophisticated understanding of non-attachment emerges from the discussion:

- Attachment to specific outcomes creates anxiety that inhibits creativity
- Focusing exclusively on the process allows for greater experimentation and risk-taking

- This isn't about lowering standards but about redirecting focus to what's within your control

### **Realistic Audience Expectations**

The "30/30/30" framework provides a reality check about artistic reception:

- 30% will love your work
- 30% will hate your work
- 30% will be indifferent
- The remaining 10% may have mixed or complex reactions

This proportional understanding helps artists escape the counterproductive belief that "everyone should like my work" while still recognizing that their work will deeply resonate with a meaningful segment of viewers.

### **Power Dynamics in Feedback**

The discussion of Liz Lerman's Critical Response method revealed new ways of thinking about power dynamics in artistic feedback:

- Traditional critique models place the artist in a vulnerable, disempowered position
- Lerman's approach consciously restructures this dynamic, giving the artist agency
- The artist guides the feedback by asking specific questions rather than opening themselves to unfocused criticism

- The artist maintains the right to decline feedback that isn't useful at their current stage

### **Social Media's Impact on Critique Norms**

The workshop acknowledged how digital culture has transformed feedback expectations:

- Social media has normalized extreme, unfiltered commentary
- The volume and harshness of online feedback can overwhelm artists' filtering mechanisms
- New psychological tools are needed to process digital-age criticism constructively

### **Advanced Mentoring Frameworks for Building Confidence:**

#### **Multi-dimensional Assessment Approach**

Nicola's framework offers a sophisticated diagnostic and development model with four key areas:

1. Practice overview: Understanding why and how the artist makes what they make
2. Resistance mapping: Identifying perceived limits and distinguishing between real and perceived limitations
3. Strengths inventory: Building from existing capabilities and competencies

4. Aspirational alignment: Connecting short-term steps to long-term ambitions

### **Temporal Integration Framework**

Gillian's approach connects past, present and future through memory and projection:

1. Confidence inventory: Cataloging all previous experiences of confidence across domains
2. Somatic anchoring: Identifying the bodily sensations associated with past confidence
3. Transfer methodology: Applying these remembered states to current creative challenges
4. Meditative connection: Using mindfulness to access inner guidance and build self-trust

### **Cognitive Reframing Models**

Multiple approaches to cognitive reframing were presented:

- Mark's perspectival framework using the bus driver analogy to illustrate how different viewers bring their own contexts
- Paul's use of powerful questions to alter mental states
- Gillian's reference to Ellis's ABCDE method for examining beliefs and their emotional consequences

## **Developmental Sequencing**

James' "baby steps" approach emphasized carefully sequenced developmental progression:

1. Root cause analysis: Understanding the specific basis of confidence challenges
2. Connection to purpose: Grounding efforts in meaningful artistic goals
3. Incremental action planning: Breaking down progress into manageable units
4. Accountability structures: Using regular check-ins to maintain momentum
5. Success celebration: Acknowledging achievements to reinforce progress

## **Practical Implementation Strategies**

### **Immediate Confidence Interventions**

For moments requiring immediate confidence:

- Physical resets (superhero poses, breathwork, movement patterns)
- Environmental modifications (props, clothing, spatial positioning)
- Pre-performance rituals that create transition into confident states
- Visualization techniques that activate confident self-identity

### **Medium-Term Development Approaches**

For building confidence over weeks or months:

- Systematic desensitization to feedback through graduated exposure
- Skills development in identified areas of technical weakness
- Regular production schedules with clear, achievable metrics
- Reflective practices that track progress and recognize growth

### **Long-Term Confidence Cultivation**

For fundamental shifts in artistic identity:

- Integration of confidence across multiple life domains
- Development of personal artistic philosophy and values framework
- Community building with supportive, growth-oriented peers
- Mentoring others to reinforce and articulate one's own confidence principles

### **Marketing Confidence Development**

We concluded with considerations for how coaches might frame confidence-building work for potential clients:

#### **Messaging Approaches**

- "Developing your life as an artist" (focusing on holistic development)
- "You are an artist: Discover your next steps" (affirming identity while promising progression)

- "Shining a light into the darkness ahead" (addressing anxiety about the unknown)
- "Learn how to produce and grow with confidence, and understand how to get up from the inevitable stumble" (acknowledging the reality of creative challenges)

### **Target Psychology**

James' approach of posing questions ("Are you afraid to reach out to galleries?") and creating a vision of the confident artist demonstrates sophisticated understanding of aspiration-based marketing.

This comprehensive approach to artistic confidence development integrates psychological theory, practical techniques, and philosophies of creativity into a cohesive framework that addresses both immediate confidence challenges and long-term artistic development.