

Sheridan graduate Akita Cachia Costa will be the first to tell you that Cooperative Education can open your mind to creative possibilities and task-efficiency. As a graduate of Sheridan's Bachelor of Illustration, one-year Arts Fundamentals program and the one-year Digital and Creative Arts program, Akita has the educational background to take on any job she desires in her field. Akita wanted more. That's why she embraced the opportunity to participate in two co-op placements during her studies, which turned out to be life-changing experiences.

"I went to the Oak Learning Centre in Oakville as a graphic designer and ended up teaching an art class to kids ages six to ten," says Akita. "It was definitely challenging because I didn't have any experience teaching before. I actually learned a lot about myself. It was a really cool eye-opening experience."

Faced with the responsibility of education young hungry minds, Akita started evaluating the way she herself took on arts projects. She says it gave her a freedom she hadn't anticipated and it forced her to look at her own skillset.

*"I began to think, if I was teaching this to myself, how would I want this to be taught?"*

Like many of us, Akita admits it was easy to fall into a work routine of completing tasks in the same previously-used methods, rather than to try new things. Her coop placement helped snap her out of the fog.

"For graphic design, I would do something that I know works and then do the same thing over and over again and found I was getting bored. It had nothing to do with graphic design, just me falling into the trap of doing what's easy.

"With the kids I was trying to teach them creative ways to do things which made me be more creative. It made me think about what is the most effective way to complete this art project? Suddenly I remembered there is always room to grow and it became exciting again."

As a first-time teacher, Akita had to look to herself for a lot of answers. She discovered that her co-op experience taught her to be a self-starter.

"I was scouting out college and high school teachers to ask them what they do. It pushed me to be an adult and it gave me the confidence to go be a teacher."

Before working at the Oak Learning Centre, Akita also had a cooperative education placement at a real-estate company. There she learned how to advertise to different age groups.

*“I had never thought of myself as collaborative per se, because artists tend to do stuff on their own,” she admits, “but we would have meetings and I learned that there isn’t one way to do something and that everyone has their own opinion.*

“Everyone has their own strengths and rather than me being an artist trying to figure out how to do business, I realized that I could turn to people where that is their strength. So why not utilize that opportunity to create something that is bigger than just me on my own?”

Learning in the workplace is very different from learning in the classroom. Akita says only when you face the working world, and what she refers to as “real life challenges”, do you find out if you have what it takes.

*“Employment is a relationship that you are either going to keep or destroy, and if you do a terrible job the employer will tell other employers not to hire you, so the stakes are a lot higher.”*