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ABSTRACT

Teaching artists in ceramics work to break through student conservatism and to spur innovations in form.

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Breaking Monotony: A Reflective Study of Teaching Decorative Pot Making



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Introduction

In art, the idea of pots being circular and cylindrical is an intuitive proposition that defines why potters have, up to the present, made wonderful decorations in the round. It is believed that potters do not want to subvert or break away from their tradition, perhaps because the art started as family craft. Throughout the ages, even before written history, pottery has been used as a medium for expression (Peterson). Hopper and Hardy both explain that pots have been used for storing things and other functions including domestic chores, for ritual, and decoration. In this study, we describe with concrete and specific examples of studio-practice how, after an initial assignment, guidance enabled a student to produce a decorative pot by breaking with monotonous spherical techniques of production.

The prime motivation of this article stems from the monotonous designs on, and persistent spherical forms of, student pots. As artists and teachers we realized we were failing since the work produced by the students, although aesthetically pleasing and in terms of functionality would receive an A mark, exhibited design concepts that were too monotonous, were ordinary, and lacked creativity and imagination. The criteria for the assessment rested manifestly on how the students were able to achieve originality and innovation in their work. We also considered how coherent the designs were, the shape and form of the pot, and the general expressiveness of thought. In sum, students were asked to develop their ideas to full potential in the general sense that having studied the course in the first diagnostic year, and majored in the first semester of their second year, works produced in the second semester should be compelling and thought-provoking.

James intimated that as teachers we continually shape our understanding of what occurs in our class and by reflecting on the nature of the events that unfold during teaching we can construct instructional bridges that can help students better understand what

is being asked of them. The focus here was on helping the students to become creative and generate artistic ideas by drawing on what we called observation, inspiration, processes, and evaluation of work. Initially, we intended to allow them to submit the assignment again but bearing in mind that pedagogy is a space "in which learning, teaching, and the creation of knowledge are foregrounded, investigated explored and critiqued" (Garoian and Gaudelius 4), we decided instead to take them through a process of creative thinking, which we hoped would be an example of how creativity can remain pedagogically pertinent to the creation of an artifact.

Our approach to teaching the students was based on a problem-solving process used in creating unique designs. We realized the need to introduce the students to different techniques in designing and art-making processes so that they will possess a strong knowledge to draw from. It is through these activities such as cross-sharing of ideas between teachers and students that the making of art becomes creative. Once students gain these experiences, the ability to explore can begin. The idea of this study is to describe how the creative processes of producing pots based on inspiration from the environment was applied to the breaking of monotonous designs and how a student was able to translate these concepts in producing a fascinating and compelling work.

About Reflective Study

As art teachers, we have maintained a philosophy that it is through an objective assessment of ourselves that we become accomplished in our field. In this vein, whenever we see students producing works where the interplay of the principles and elements of art is not fully explored or grounded, we become indicted and feel we have let our students down. It is therefore expedient to do a self-study to find out what is wrong in order to improve. According to Bullough and Pinnegar, reflective study is grounded in the trustworthiness and meaningfulness of the findings both for informing practice to improve teacher education and for moving the research conversation in teacher education forward.

Like other forms of research, self-study invites the reader into the research process by asking that interpretations be checked, that themes be critically scrutinized, and that the "so what" question be vigorously pressed. In self-studies, conclusions are hard-won, elusive, and generally more tentative than not. The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle.

Again, self-study research also allows us as teachers to identify our weakness in transmitting knowledge in the class. Cochran-Smith and Lytle and Clandinin and Connelly put it as valuing the inherent complexity of classroom practice.

The Studio Context

"Wheel and Hand Forming Techniques" is a studio practice course within the ceramics major option under the Industrial Art undergraduate program at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. It is a course tailored to bring out creativity in students through their use of both their hands and the potter's wheel in producing stupendous artistic creations using clay. The course is a continuation of its introduction at the first diagnostic year, after which the students have acquired some level of dexterity. The course begins with centering on the wheel, throwing basic shapes, pot formation of diverse shapes and forms by the slab and the coil methods, and other techniques. The students had registered for this course in the second semester, meaning this was their fourth time taking the course.

Given the fact these students were taking the course for a fourth time, we were expecting an appreciable level of innovation, originality, and gravitation away from conservative designs. Furthermore, some students identified themselves as being creative not only in ceramics but in painting, sculpture, and mixed-media. With a class size of twenty-seven students (seventeen male and ten female), we were convinced that during their production of works, their reflections and interactions would promote fascinating works.

In the first studio assignment, students were asked to produce a pot of dimensions

of their choosing. The object of the assignment was to (1) demonstrate creative abilities, (2) break monotony, and (3) show multifunctionality. They were given three weeks to present the assignment. As teachers, we usually give students ample time to produce something creative and thought-provoking. At the end of the third week, when the works were presented for evaluation, we realized that the pots produced were all spherical in shape (Image 1). It is so useful and interesting to see the two examples displayed in Image 1 and think about the designs as limited simply because the examples are seemingly so technically

advanced but were defined as monotonous by us. By "monotonous" we mean in the sense that they were all spherical and the designs were conservative, something we see in our daily activities. The shapes were basic and novelty was lacking.

When we questioned the students, we learned that they did not have any source of inspiration that might lead them to produce divergent pieces. There was therefore a need to sharpen creative experiences and assist students in cultivating creative habits by studying nature, making sketch models, reading, and thinking divergently among others to solve artistic problems (Stewart).



Image 1: Samples of work produced by students in the initial assignment.

Teacher–Student Dialogue After the First Assignment of Making a Pot

According to Dewey, development occurs in students when there is give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. Initially, the students protested against the assessment and generously called for explanations. They even remarked that their colleagues from the sciences and engineering praised their work highly. It was an obvious reaction, which we expected, given the efforts the students put in producing their pots, and a dialogue ensued. The students were congratulated for their efforts and made to understand that assessing an artwork must be done qualitatively. We made them come around to see their colleagues' works and agreed that they have all produced pots in the same shape and form. Seemingly, the designs were interplays of lines and dots. The most effective dialogue used was the language of motivation and encouragement, the objectivity of going an extra mile in practice.

During the mentoring period, there was resistance from the students, particularly on the quantity of sketches they had to develop from their source of inspiration. However, they understood that it is through sketches that creativity can be explored. When they had fully understood these processes and the work was emerging, it was heartwarming to

see that their enthusiasm increased in a way that producing something ordinary was not their hallmark.

Drawing Inspiration

Quinn opines that to draw or get inspired calls for time, searching widely, and calling in disparate sources. Students were made aware that inspiration may come in a jiffy, or as a result of something that invigorates you. In this vein, they were made to understand that they should scribble down any form of inspiration that comes to them because pushing it off until later will mean it never comes back as original. Various sources of stimuli can be recorded to heighten our visual inspiration and provide adequate ground in broadening the scope for a concept.

Of interest, at the back of our students' working studio is a garden where we occasionally have some lessons. During one of our outdoor lessons, a moving millipede (Image 2) caught our attention. The class was fascinated by how one piece of an arthropod has various segments within its skin and how a large piece of its body rests on tiny pieces of legs. We all came to a conclusion that the concept of a moving millipede can be a great source of inspiration in decorative pot making. Using specific narrative, we discuss purposively how one student produced a compelling pot using

the moving millipede as the source of inspiration. All the students produced very creative and usefully provocative works using other sources of inspiration.



Image 2:
Moving millipede.

During one of our outdoor lessons, a moving millipede (Image 2) caught our attention. The class was fascinated by how one piece of an arthropod has various segments within its skin and how a large piece of its body rests on tiny pieces of legs.

Helping the Student Develop Ideas From Inspiration

Upon careful observation and the inspiration of the moving millipede, preliminary sketches were made and developed. From the sequence of sketches obtained, one was selected and a further transformation was done. The student was taught to understand that idea development requires both subjective and objective consciousness. The student was taken through sketching out plans of ideas and thoughts, which provided a platform to free the mind from the bondage of expression. Combining form, symbols, functions, principles, and elements of design, standards, abstractions, and aesthetics provided essence in critical thinking.

Guiding the Student to Implement Ideas

The student was made to understand that developing a design is not a simple task. It

is one that requires series of procedures. According to Quinn, developing ideas to full potential requires a number of activities. In this vein a thorough investigation of ideas was undertaken through sketching, brainstorming, maquettes, and prototypes. The students were guided to make sketches to record series of ideas that were developed from the inspiration of the moving millipede. Different sketches were produced, and the class agreed to produce a pot based on the tergites of the millipede. The tergites formed the base, which was divided into sixteen sections.

A semicircle was drawn starting from points 2 to 5, 6 to 9, 10 to 13, repeatedly. The midpoints were located between points 3 and 4, 7 and 8, 11 and 12, and so forth. In between points 3 and 4, 7 and 8, 11 and 12, and so forth, 2.5 inches were marked vertically between points A and B.

The process was done on both sides, and this was transferred to locally processed clay. It was necessary to apply these markings while leather-hard. A knife was used to cut along the drawn semicircles to half of the thickness of the slab. The half slabs were carefully pushed toward the inner part of the base, and they were scoured and filled with coils of the same clay composition. The process was repeated until all the walls of the semicircled areas were enclosed. The kidney (shaping tool) was used to sweep out all excess clay from the joints to attain a neat edge. The opened areas on top were scoured and built with slabs to completely

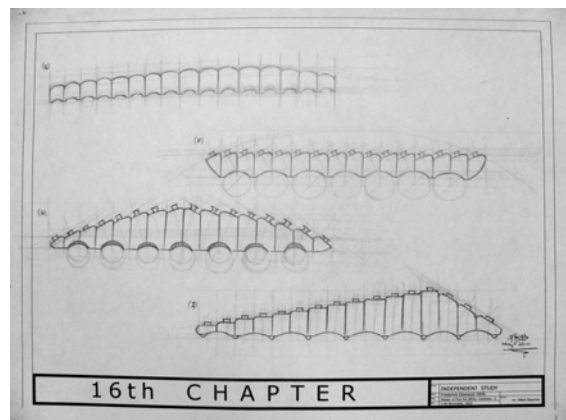
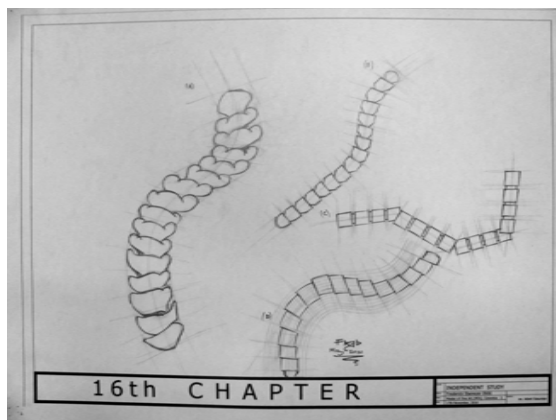


Image 3: (left) Sequential movement of sections. (right) Height distribution of sections.

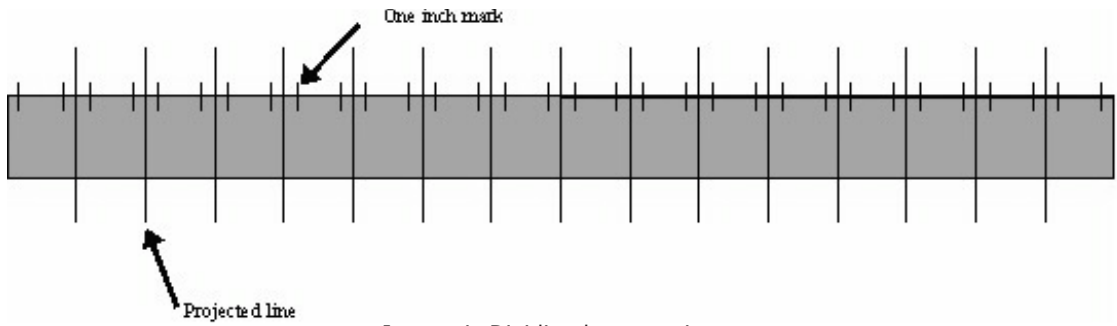


Image 4: Dividing base sections.

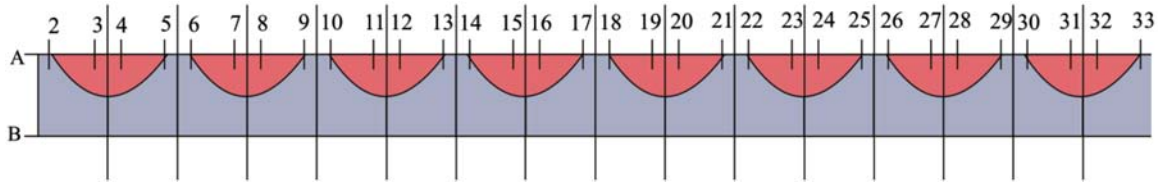


Image 5: A plan showing points at which curves were constructed.



Image 6: Shaping base curves.

get the whole piece sealed. The same process was repeated until the last space was closed. The piece was then cut into four different segments to enable turning. Once turned, the cut pieces were joined again to form a single piece. To avoid rapid drying, which results in cracks, the work was covered with polythene sheets.

Constructing the Sixteen Segmental Pots

The processed clay was rolled into a slab of 10 mm thickness. Because of the rise and curvy nature of individual pots, the slabs were cut according to their heights. The slabs for the sixteen segments started with a rectangular slab measuring 170 × 115 × 60 mm. The two areas to be joined were scoured and slipped. Slabs were joined and sealed at the joint with a 0.5-mm thick coil. The leather-hard state of the slabs enabled the manipulation of the slabs to achieve a curve. The hand was used as the first shaping tool regardless of the method used. With respect to the design, three segments were built after the starting point (i.e., sections 2, 3, and 4). The other half was built from the extreme end, eliminating section 16. This enabled the appropriate curve for the middle pots to be modelled effectively. Carefully, the remaining sections were constructed continuing from section 5 to section 8 and from section 12 to section 9. In a situation where the height allows the shoulder of a sectional vase to become wide, an adjustment was made, since the shoulder of each vase was subjective to the height it raised.

A square rule was used to mark and cut out triangular slabs to seal the top portions of the vases. The angles depended on the dimension of each side of an open area. We hoped to attain a conical joint. The procedure was repeated until the tops of the various sections were covered with the slabs. A circle was drawn on each of the converging points and cut open with a knife. A repeated procedure was used for all sixteen segments.

The necks of all sixteen sections were thrown on a potters' wheel. The necks were scoured and the slip aided in joining. The

joints were further sealed with coils. The rim of each section was measured, and lids were thrown on the potters' wheel for the respective necks. At leather-hard state, it was trimmed and fixed onto each section of the sixteen necks. Patterns were drawn onto the surfaces of each of the sixteen sections of the vase using a pencil. The knife-shaped modelling tool was used to mark through the already-drawn patterns to provide thicker outlines. The individual patterns expressed emotional feelings.

This article is arguing in favor of a more assertive intervention by teaching artists but of a very generative and open kind—a push not toward a specific aesthetics or approach, but a push toward in-depth exploration, analysis, spontaneous play and association, design development, and revision.

The patterns were subjected to different color regions. Iron oxide was mixed with water to make a paste, and a sable brush was used to apply the mixture onto the surfaces that demanded bright red as shown in Image 7 on the next page. Areas covering reddish brown were unpainted since the local clay fired at 1100°C provided the color scheme. White slip was used to coat the areas that demanded white color, and a yellowish composed glaze was used to paint areas that required dark brown effect. The *16th Chapter Pot* in the green state was allowed to dry slowly by loosely covering the piece with plain polythene sheets for twenty-eight days and then fired to a temperature of 1100°C.

Discussion

After the production of the work, the student remarked in our local language, "kani no na me di agro," which translates as, "I was joking at first." We could infer with confidence that this remark was the student's way of mediating the strangeness

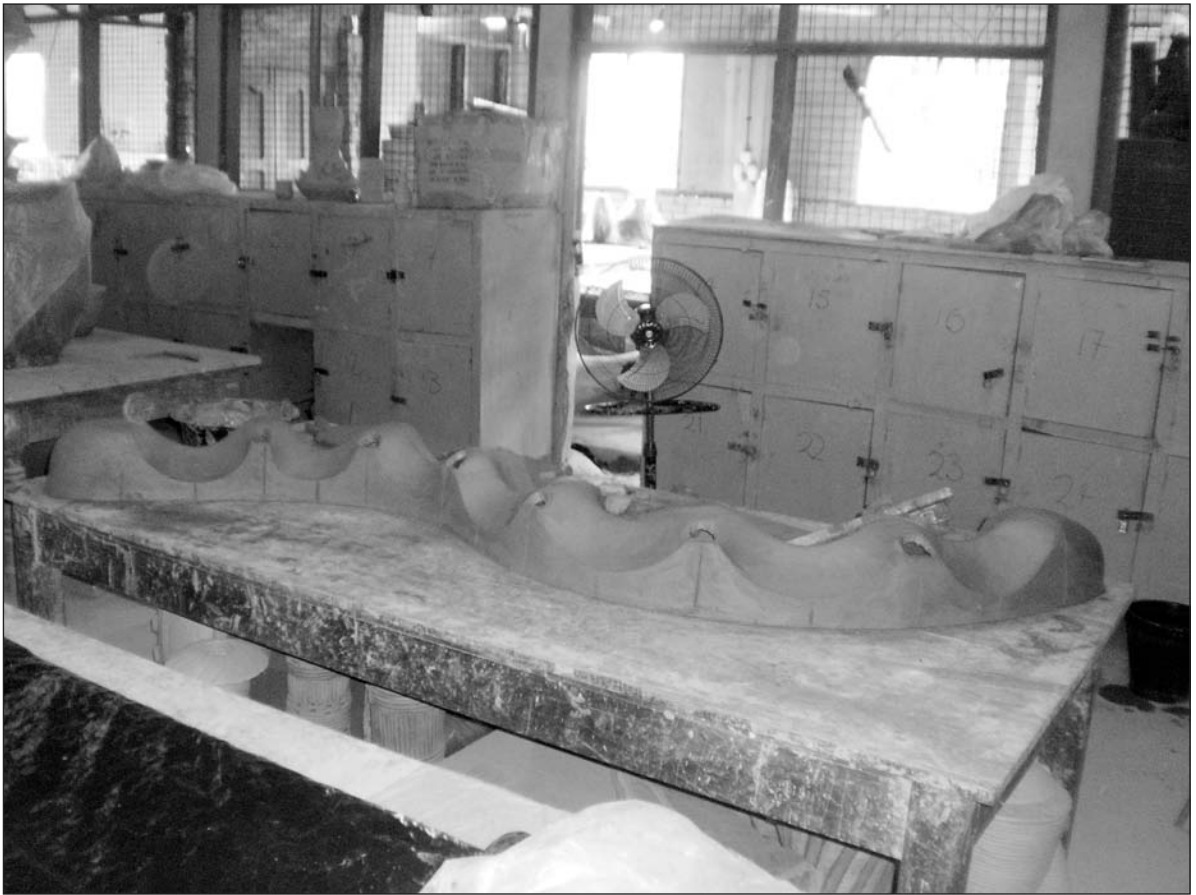


Image 7 (left page): Formation stages and drawing patterns on the decorative pot.

Image 8 (below): *16th Chapter Pot* (2010). 'Afari' clay, white slip, iron oxide, manganese oxide and glaze. Dimension: 86 in. × 6 in. × 29 in.



The multisectional component of the *16th Chapter Pot* is seen in the unification of five compatible pieces that combine to form a single unit. The Adam and Eve locking mechanism was adapted to this piece. However, a subtraction or omission of a single section deprives the piece of

or novelty of the solution of breaking monotony. The student's remark also gave us the impression that the student was satisfied with his work and has benefited from the process of creative exploration. To us as teachers, it has provided the opportunity to go back and change the method of teaching art where students are monitored and provided with close assistance for their sequential sketches to direct their creative skills and refrain from producing monotonous works. Chang suggests that a self-monitoring strategy on students will generate improved academic performance and greater student motivation.

its sense of unity and leaves it restrained by incompleteness. The multisegmented feature of the piece allows easy packing and movement since it could be taken in parts. It is worthy of note that the construction of decorative pots could take a dimension whereby many can attend to the call and exhibit a sense of great craftsmanship to help eliminate the monotony in decorative pots production. The *16th Chapter Pot* is designed for the beautification of lobbies. The piece invites the use of an extra decorative element such as flowers (either artificial or natural). It can also house colored straws, branches, or metal poles

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for beautification. They are put in each segmented section with the lids opened. The relationship between the design and functionality is in the movement of the segmented sections and their height distribution. It has been designed to reduce boredom because it is engaging and brings diversity, and the designs puts modernity in the style of decorative pottery. Contemporary ceramic pots should be diversified in form, style, and concept. A careful planning of an idea through inspiration, concept, sketching, drawing maquettes, and prototyping can help yield interesting and beautiful pieces for decoration. The student understood the vision that was set through optimum analysis and sketching, and the availability of the idea in the physical product provided a sense of happiness as the imaginary came to light.

Context for Teaching Artists

The ideals of both art and teaching are informed by a "systems approach" to creativity, which envisions creativity as a complex process that is socially and cultural interactive and in which multiple insights and heuristics are utilized in a "constant interplay among purpose, play, and chance" (Gruber 4). We believe that teaching, like art making, is a process of divergent and convergent thinking, risk taking, and merging of inner vision with outer experience (Stewart). In teaching, this means that although the teacher has a vision of how to achieve goals,

a toolbox of ways to help students learn, and knowledge about the subject matter, close interactions will always generate emerging information that demands improvisation and leads to new and unexpected forms and insights (Moore).

One major finding worthy of mention is the kind of attraction the artifact received during the 60th Anniversary celebration of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. The participants, nonart students, and visitors were enthused about the inspiration from a moving millipede. The aesthetic appeals of the pot coupled with the concepts all promoted meaningful responses to students. The careful experimental procedures that were followed can indeed be a source of significant experience in teaching art. The significant experience gained through the building of the *16th Chapter Pot* teaches a model for pushing past certain design or psychological blocks in design innovation. Furthermore, the visual qualities of the artifacts provide a platform for students to build diverging interpretations.

The outcome of these studio projects is an exemplar for art teaching. The inspiration for the project rests manifestly on the tergites of a moving millipede, which was captured by careful observation. This suggested a model to the students in which observation is one key process in the production of an artifact. According to Nisbet, observation is not a natural gift but a highly skilled activity for which an extensive background knowledge and understanding, a capacity for original thinking, and the ability to spot significant events are required.

Of interest, since the work was produced in a studio where other students were also working, it is obvious that the *16th Chapter Pot* may bring to fruition tangible discourse from the students and better understanding of the materials used and experimental procedures followed in order to manipulate them effectively for artistic works. When students are able to comprehend their materials and have their own philosophy, they appreciate the import of art and express personal meaning through their works.

Conclusion

This article argues in favor of a more assertive intervention by teaching artists but of a very generative and open kind—a push not toward a specific aesthetics or approach, but a push toward in-depth exploration, analysis, spontaneous play and association, design development, and revision. The study discussed in this article has shown how helpful it is to have a strong collaboration between teachers and students in producing artworks in which teachers pinpoint problems, challenges, and shortfalls in student work. This article is not against the idea of allowing students to create out of their own vision but suggests the importance of teacher guidance in how to get inspiration, develop ideas, and create stupendous artistic

creations. The study has shown through the works produced by the students that teaching art involves giving students the ability to discover; that creativity is not just defined by how “realistically” they can mold an artifact or how skillful they are with clay. Rather, creativity emerges from a visual investigation of one’s surroundings that leads to understanding and a sense of identity. Students and art teachers can study their environment and develop design concepts from such study. Art students can go beyond the styles of producing pottery by using geometric forms other than monotonous spherical shapes. The creative sensibilities of students can be developed through creative artistic experiences and imagination, and the creative breakthroughs of one student can motivate others.

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