

Teaching Ceramics: The Essentials of a Program

by Steven Branfman

Teaching, whether it is philosophy, history, literature, physics, or even pottery is not an activity to be taken lightly. The roles of teacher and student are not rigid but fluid. Each shares a responsibility to the other and each in fact is the other. Without this synergy, the classroom is a static, uninspired place.

Teaching is an activity that I do with joy, love, and dedication, and the personal rewards I've reaped are numerous. Teaching is a craft, an art and a skill. Teaching is academic, intellectual and emotional. All your personal reasons for becoming a potter – drive, desire, urgency, passion, and the other inner forces that direct your energy and interest – apply to becoming a teacher. Moreover, to excel at this difficult task you must be expert in your craft and have the ability to share and communicate your knowledge to your students. So the stage is set for an activity bursting with feeling, sensation and reward. There is however an undeniable (and sometimes painful) link between the sensitive, emotional side of teaching and the practical applications of teaching, limitations that may be imposed through facilities, scheduling, class size and resources. Some of these factors that will affect your teaching and classroom management will be out of your control. Other factors are completely governed by your influence. Thankfully these are the ones that are the most critical.

Who are your students? Why are they in this class? How can you best serve their interests through an experience with clay? You may have students whose goal it is to attend art school. At the other end of the spectrum there will be students for whom this clay class will be the only art or craft class they will ever take. Some will come to your class from households brimming with art, craft, music, intellectualism and culture while others may not appreciate the difference between a handmade clay drinking vessel and a mug bought in the checkout aisle of K Mart. Some will have taken art or pottery classes before while others are going to be making stuff for the first time. A teacher must forge connections between the subject matter and the students. You have a responsibility to make the case that clay is relevant, not just for the moment but for all time, and you must do this in a language that speaks to the subject of art and craft, one that the students can speak as well. Students are motivated to learn only when inspired to do so. But in order to proceed you must know your audience. You must identify and select the areas of ceramics that will become part of their experience.

If you are going to teach the subject of ceramics then what is to be eliminated and why? What part of learning about clay is less important? History? Culture? Coil building? Throwing? Glaze making? Firing? The decisions you make are tied directly to your own philosophy of, and attitude toward clay working as well as to your approach to teaching. Although you may have a fully well-rounded ceramics education with the attitude that no aspect of ceramics can be left out, practical considerations may dictate otherwise. The most obvious of these may be limitations imposed by time. At Thayer Academy, where I teach, the studio classes meet for two fifty-five-minute periods twice a week for the entire year. You may think this an impossible handicap or, on the other hand, that almost two full hours a week may be a luxury. Either way, when faced with the fact that I could not teach my students everything there is to know about ceramics in such a short amount of time I have to decide what is most important and how to incorporate those "less important" aspects of clay into my presentations.

Long ago I decided that a hands-on clay experience where the students concentrate their efforts on making things is the most relevant, captivating, and rewarding adventure I could provide. There is no homework or written work, and because of their academic loads it is not practical to expect the students to come into the studio other than during their class time. In my effort to streamline, I have not forsaken the balance of clay education. For example, rather than dedicate a class period to a lecture on glaze materials, I will introduce important details and concepts while demonstrating how to read and mix a glaze recipe. Of those "missing" subjects, history and culture are the most critical in one's education and of least importance to the students. Each week I bring in a piece of work from my own collection. We call it "The Pot of The Week" and in a very short time for many of the students it has become a highlight. I limit my presentation to five minutes. I identify the work, describe it, give its history and origin, and tell the students why it is in my collection. Having the pot to handle is the key element to making the connection between history and personal relevance.

The study of ceramics is an activity often viewed as extracurricular by administrators, academics, and parents. The attitude that ceramics is less than serious makes our work as teachers even more difficult. It is our responsibility to transcend and overcome the limitations imposed upon us and make the study of clay relevant and rewarding to those students entrusted to our care.

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