

Teaching Philosophy

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My teaching is a process of growing for my students and for myself, using a creative medium to mine our rich human potential. With every semester I learn more about teaching and make use of that knowledge the following semester. Learning has always been a pleasure for me and I try hard to make it a pleasure for my students, if a demanding one.

Ceramics classes are very different from most other classes in the University. Process is a large part of the ceramics class experience. Classes are three hours long and communal. The work undertaken results in a three-dimensional witness to what a student has earned. There is no hiding in the back of the room. The students review every completed project. This can be a fearful situation for students, comparable to everyone discussing and evaluating every paper submitted in a lecture class. The work is inherently public and the class is in many ways a stage with all the complexities of production and performance at work.

In this context the example of my behavior and who I am become a significant part of the lesson. With this in mind, I attempt to be the sum of all that I believe has value, and try to live out my convictions in the studio. I love to work with clay, to challenge myself by attempting the unknown. The bar is always just above what I can reach. My example carries over in my attitude of civility and fairness, to giving students a high degree of control over their grade, to being thoughtful and patient with them as individuals who are much more than just students of ceramics. I feel morally obliged to teach awareness of health and safety issues involved with the clay process. I suspect that this way of being is as significant as the lessons on the ways of doing.

My teaching is the presentation of possibilities. Structurally, I use encouragement and inducement in order to de-emphasize “jumping through the hoops for the teacher”, to provide students with a sense of being in control of their progress and its outcome. I incrementally expose students to complex information. This information is a parallel development of technical “how-to” and encouragement to find and use the creative voice that is unique to each. The semester is designed so that students are given the bulk of the how-to in the first half. The second half has considerably more open time to employ and develop skills. This same principle applies to the beginning and advanced clay classes. In the second class, Ceramics Workshop, assignments are broad and require the student to exercise their creative voice. Work is completed on a regular basis to insure that the entire process is being studied, not just fabrication.

For several years I have been experimenting with various permutations of cross-listing the advanced classes with the Continuing Education program. This allows committed, non-traditional students to enrich the studio environment as both artists and one-on-one teachers outside of class time. They are active in the studio during much of the time that I am not present. As a result the full-time students see widely different attitudes to claywork and firing methods.

As time allows, I also act as an artist-in-residence by doing of my own work in the studio, using the same resources available to students and sharing my successes and failures. I have received a number of grants to support my creative and research efforts.

These generate enthusiasm and knowledge, ultimately invigorating everyone in the studio.

In order for students to understand the creative potential of clay, I propose a number of characteristics of clay that bear thinking about. Claywork is a tool fundamental to sculpture. The study of clay underlies all three-dimensional art. Yet in addition to opening the door to form, volume and space, it also provides a surface that can engage all the beauty and challenge of two-dimensional drawing and painting.

Once fired, clay objects enter geologic time. They are literally stones and have the life-span of a rock. An apt analogy for a kiln is a pet volcano. What is it that students would like to say in this newly acquired voice that allows them to speak over a period of possibly thousands of years? Clay is earth. Objects made of clay can be both vessels for food and ritual objects which honor the earth's sustaining our life. Today we all need to comprehend again our dependence on the earth. Awareness of personal responsibility acquires new force at the prospect of a thumbprint appearing on a fired object hundreds of thousands of years later.

I don't think of students as merely members of a given class. They are members of the studio. Once enrolled, they have 24-hour access. The studio becomes theirs for the semester, along with all the responsibility that implies. I try to ensure that this environment is rich and supportive of everyone in it. Our strong sense of shared enterprise is a lesson that I hope carries over into their larger world.