# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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**http://www.ijea.org** **ISBN 1529-8094**

**Volume 8 Number 9** **August 29, 2007**


## Drawing with Light and Clay: Teaching and Learning in the Art Studio as Pathways to Engagement


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Citation: Albertson, C., & Davidson, M. (2007). Drawing with light and clay: Teaching and learning in the art studio as pathways to engagement. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, *8*(9), Retrieved [date] from http://ijea.asu.edu/v8n9/.



**Abstract**

In this essay, Albertson and Davidson explore the attributes of photography and ceramic arts education to identify eight key elements integral to engagement in these art studios for under-served and disenchanted learners. They suggest that these key elements can provide numerous clues as to how teachers and school communities might re-imagine both their mission and approach to classroom practice. Through this exploration, they relate literature on apprentice models of teaching and learning, relational education, resiliency theory, and care in the context of classroom practice to their experience and research into teaching and learning in photography and ceramic arts. Albertson and Davidson believe that what is good for the most vulnerable learners, is

good for others too, and by bringing these attributes to light, it is their goal to illustrate some of the ways that all teachers might build pathways to engagement for their own 'tough audiences' in all subject areas

## Introduction

*Figure 1.* Miriam Davidson, 2002

*Figure 2.* Constant Albertson, 2005

The back of the classroom can be a teacher's biggest challenge. From here come the projectiles, the stylized eye roll, or worse, the slouching sprawl. Yet, these learners who are the most vulnerable to disengagement are the ones who most attract us—call them *at-risk*, *disengaged*, or *wounded* learners. These sensitive, often fragile young people are the mining canaries of the educational system, and our experience teaching ceramics and photography to young people between the ages of 8 and 18 has taught us that if they are dropping away, others are not far behind. Although there is research and writing (Guggenheim Museum Press Office, 2006; Chatterall, 1998; Eisner, 1998 a, b; Silver,

1989) debating the direct and indirect effects of arts education on academic skills, raising test scores, and strengthening literacy and oral language skills, there is a dearth of literature focusing on the potential benefits of arts education on the social and affective aspects of student development and engagement in learning and school life. We suggest that the qualities intrinsic to art production in a studio environment, when delivered through a thoughtful and caring pedagogy, (in this case in the clay and photography studios), can provide important clues as to how teachers and school communities might re-imagine both their mission and approach to classroom practice.

For many years we have informally compared notes about our separate fields of photography and the ceramic arts. We have noticed remarkable similarities in process, approaches to studio and teaching practice, studio environment, cultural/ historical contexts and outcomes that seem to draw in students, who, for whatever reason, have become disengaged in school. Initially it might seem a stretch to find significant similarities between the ceramics and the photography studios. With only a cursory look, the clay studio appears dusty, damp, hot and dirty. By contrast, the photography studio is pristine, temperature controlled**,** dust free and clean. Then, there is the significant difference of an extra dimension in ceramics. Notwithstanding these very obvious differences, we posit that from a pedagogical perspective, there are fundamental similarities and characteristics in both the process and classroom dynamics of these art learning environments. We believe that these characteristics may be uniquely compelling and attractive to those learners, who most easily fall away, often becoming disenchanted with school.

We have worked to translate our respective artistic, teaching and research practices towards addressing disengagement from learning and we get very excited by the glimmers of hope, and the intrinsic humour, intelligence, inventiveness and pride that we have seen in those students who come to us with their defenses raised. In the process, we have questioned what is working, why do learners who do not thrive in traditional classrooms regularly reanimate in the clay studio or the darkroom? To borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan (1964, p. 23) is this a case of "the medium is the message?" In other words, are there experiences, techniques, or rewards intrinsic to ceramics and photography that help to hook these young people? Or is it more about teaching methodology? Are there qualities/approaches that we share as art teachers that create a positive classroom environment, encouraging young people to become active participants in their learning? And, is it possible that these studio environments are fertile ground for the implementation of apprenticeship models of teaching and learning, relational education and resiliency theories, providing educators with opportunities to practice a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1992)?

With these questions in mind, we pulled several themes out of our individual doctoral research projects, which in part focused on how learning in the ceramic arts (Albertson, 2001) and in photography (Davidson, 2000) in school and community-based settings worked to support and engage students who were struggling with some aspect of their schooling. Additionally, we considered our own experiences of working with pre-service teachers between 1995-2006 at Concordia University in Montreal, the University of Maine in Orono, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Just as importantly, we analyzed a variety of artifacts related to these teaching experiences. For example, we considered the physical organization of our respective teaching studios, our course syllabi, and the content we deliver in ceramics, photography and in our art education courses. Through a careful consideration of the material outlined above, we identified several qualities and components that helped us to see how the media, the technical, social, and affective aspects of learning in these two artistic disciplines help to engage students with a range of needs and learning styles. In order to discuss our thoughts, and for purposes of clarity, we have identified *eight key elements* that we see as critical to encouraging students to give themselves over to the learning experience with less fear of failure, anxiety, self-doubt, and resistance.

What follows is a discussion relating our experience of teaching and learning in the ceramics and photography studios, particularly with regard to learners who are struggling with some aspect of their schooling. We will consider how learning and artistic expression in these very different, yet highly related, artistic fields can offer teachers and students potent and inspiring ways of exploring and expressing ideas and feelings, examining alternative possibilities, and building community. By bringing these attributes to light, it is our goal to illustrate some of the ways that *all* teachers might build pathways to engagement for their "tough audiences" in subject areas ranging from science to social studies.

## Moving Toward Engagement – Eight Key Elements

### Community and Citizenship:

A sense of belonging to a community is an outgrowth of working in the clay studio or the darkroom. While concepts of community and citizenship are recurring themes in this essay, this section focuses on how the technical and physical qualities of these materials promote a sense of awareness of others within a group. We suggest that these experiences have the potential to reach out past the doors of the clay studio or darkroom, helping to enhance students' interpersonal relationships in all aspects of their lives.

The reality is that many people working in these two technology-heavy fields find it necessary to share tools, equipment and studio space, which can be large and/or heavy and expensive; and collective use can spread the costs and maintenance work, making art production in these fields much more reasonable. Additionally, group or collaborative work is often necessary in art forms that involve moving heavy objects and/or complex technical processes. In the clay studio, beginners can rarely fill an entire kiln with their own work; therefore it is necessary to share kiln space and firing chores. Firing kilns, making clay, or moving large clay sculptures requires peer cooperation, organization and responsibility. Similarly, developing many roles of film, washing prints, or setting them to dry are all tasks that can benefit from thoughtful, careful collaboration. It makes no sense to develop one role of film alone; it is much more cost effective and time efficient to develop several roles at once. This communal activity necessitates that the individuals "giving up" their film for processing trust in the abilities of their peers to produce high-quality negatives.

This kind of mutual reliance is necessarily based upon peers' interpersonal knowledge and ability to communicate, but also implies faith in each other's technical and procedural knowledge, and belief in each others' ability and willingness to pay careful attention to detail. There is a communal sense that responsibility is imperative, and it is enforced with social and peer pressure. Any behavior that affects another's work tends to be peer regulated because several people suffer from one person's sloppiness. In the clay studio, when firing shifts are missed or someone is careless in measuring chemicals for a shared glaze, artwork might be destroyed or equipment damaged. Similarly, when students in the darkroom are careless about chemistry or clean up, film can be damaged and relationships between members in the studio compromised. This irresponsibility can be a highly censured behavior; conversely, being treated as a responsible individual is a factor in developing a positive self-image, which is linked to school achievement (Garbarino & Stott, 1989). Experiencing these working relationships with peers and teachers/mentors can be a critical learning opportunity, especially for those youth who are regularly viewed as "trouble makers" or irresponsible in relation to their academic performance or behaviour. Becoming a trusted member of a team can be a significant learning experience for all young people and is particularly relevant for those students on the margins.

For reasons that usually have more to do with inadequate classroom spaces or insufficient teaching staff than with intentional pedagogy, classes in these areas are often made up of mixed levels with beginners in the same classroom as more advanced learners. This sets up the opportunity for peer-teaching, which is a recommended strategy for students with learning difficulties (Smith, 1991). Even without this sort of formally mixed-level classes, opportunities for peer teaching are abundant when individuals from a variety of

levels share space in the photography or clay studio. At least some part of the process of making a ceramic piece or photograph will be most easily accomplished in a collective space, with the mentorship of more experienced learners and, of course, a master artist/teacher. This dynamic makes for a multilayered apprenticeship model of teaching and learning, where students, even those who are relative beginners, can assist and support other learners and, in turn, are guided by those in the learning environment who have been at it longer.

Both ceramics and photography are highly technical art forms dependent on a collective attitude of care, respect for others, and professionalism toward materials and equipment, both for safety and technical reasons. These attitudes are crucial for success in production of art in either medium. Therefore, individuals who can cooperate or are looking for a supportive community may be drawn to these art forms (Gardner, 1993; 1990).[1] Alternatively, learners who do not have the social skills to work well collaboratively can practice in increments, strengthening these skills, through reinforced peer-pressure.

Perhaps this enhanced sense of community and responsibility might then be transferred from the art classroom to the larger society. It is no accident that one of the most successful and well-publicized service-learning projects, *The Empty Bowls Project* [2], originated in a high school ceramics classroom. Similarly, there are many photography projects and related publications that emphasize social justice issues such as *Shooting Back* (Hubbard, 1991) out of Washington, D.C. or *Venice Arts In Neighborhoods*[3], which is a non-profit arts organization that facilitates several powerful photographic projects such as *Picturing Race* and *Girls Lives through Girls Eyes*. Service and community are integral to the structures of learning in these fields.

## Technical Processes and Gaining Control:

Both ceramics arts and photography can be very rewarding to novice learners, offering important benefits for individuals under stress, such as self-expression, tension-relief and the vicarious testing of alternative possibilities and narratives (Edwards, 1994). Further,

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[1] Also see Pariser's (1997, p. 40) discussion of the importance of Gardner's inter-personal intelligence for a successful career in the arts.

[2] *Empty Bowls* is a service learning project originally started in 1990 in a Michigan high school art class to highlight the problems of hunger in the community and raise funds for a local food bank (www.emptybowls.net)

[3] *Venice Arts In Neighborhoods* is a program originally started by Jim Hubbard of *Shooting Back*. It is based in Venice Beach California and offers arts programming to young people with a focus on themes of social justice (www.venice-arts.org)

we have all seen impressive photographs made by beginners with a disposable camera or a satisfactory pinch pot or animal sculpture with dime store clay.

Photography and ceramic art forms may initially be less intimidating to newcomers and students with low self-esteem, who give up easily or who have a record of school failure. In Davidson's (2000) study, a group of students who had experienced significant failure in school were introduced to photography as part of a larger project looking at the connection between photographic practice and the improvement of literacy and enhanced pleasure in learning. The study indicates that from the start participants were highly successful taking photographs and learning the darkroom procedures. Their first photographs were very valuable despite any technical problems, such as under or over exposure or blurriness. Peers, teachers, and family members recognized these initial images as beautiful and meaningful, a significant achievement for the children and one that motivated them to continue on to master more difficult darkroom and technical skills.

Although one can make a satisfactory photo or clay vessel relatively early on in their studies, in order to progress in each medium, systematic and organized research and practice is necessary. However, the initial successes that these fields usually offer can help to encourage fragile learners to persevere. Success in a task that is demanding, achievable, and valued is one of the best ways to help promote a learner's sense of dignity and worth, which is linked to achievement (Biehler & Snowman, 1993; Garbarino & Stott, 1989).

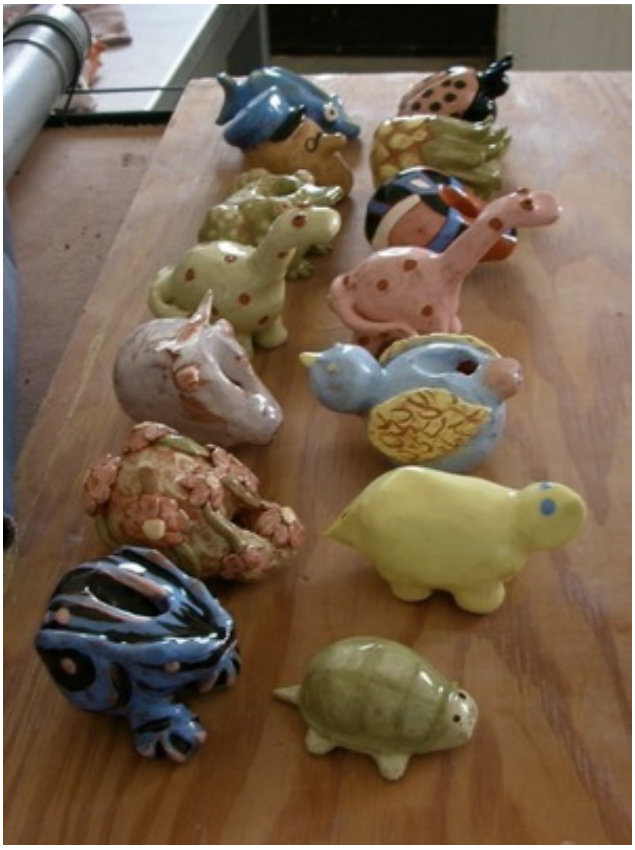

*Figure 3.* Clay whistles

There are a variety of ways that this success is earned: by physical manipulation and testing of materials, through "demonstration, observation and coaching in context" (Gardner, 1989, p. 75), and through texts. This is an apprenticeship model, which is often the norm in photography and ceramics education. Typically this model is also recommended for

students with learning difficulties (Smith, 1991; Dominy & Rees, 1997) and others (Howard, 2005; Meier, 1995) who would benefit from a learning environment where actions and consequences, cause and effect, are intimately and obviously, tied together (Biehler & Snowman, 1993). Because the goal is to learn to control the materials towards the learners' ends, the motivation is strong and intrinsic. There are concrete/functional markers that must be reached in order to have success: for example, clay walls must be even and consistent or cracks may develop. Photographs must have correct exposures, development times, and temperatures; negatives must be handled gently and chemistry must be fresh and clean. For those learners with a "discovery orientation" (Winner & Casey, 1992, p. 156) who tend to encode information visually, this way of learning is not only effective, but can be a powerful relief. For students suffering from learning difficulties, photography and ceramics education can be particularly powerful as "production usually precedes comprehension" (Gardner, 1989, p. 73).

However even with the rigorous technical aspects of these practices, the route to learning and success can be individualized, which is an important consideration for those whose usual modes of learning are contrary to what is normally rewarded in many classrooms (Biehler & Snowman, 1995). In a research study (Albertson, 2001) into successful compensation for the learning disability dyslexia, highly successful adult ceramists indicated that it was important that they could learn in ways that were comfortable to them, but also noted that they tended to persevere longer in reading difficult ceramics texts because they were so interested and hungry for information. As their contextual knowledge and vocabulary grew, so did their ability to approach and decode new texts. With reading practice, reading in general became easier for these adults. Taking and organizing good notes, paying attention to sequencing, reading, listening, watching, and experimentation became important and worthy of the extra effort involved. These were all skills that improved through use and were directly transferable to other learning situations. A very similar finding also surfaced in Davidson's (2000) study in which a group of students in an elementary school setting took part in extended work in photography and creative writing. The students and their teachers expressed similar feelings about the step-by-step nature of working in the darkroom (see Figure 4), and how these routine procedures were comforting, helped build confidence, and encouraged experimentation.

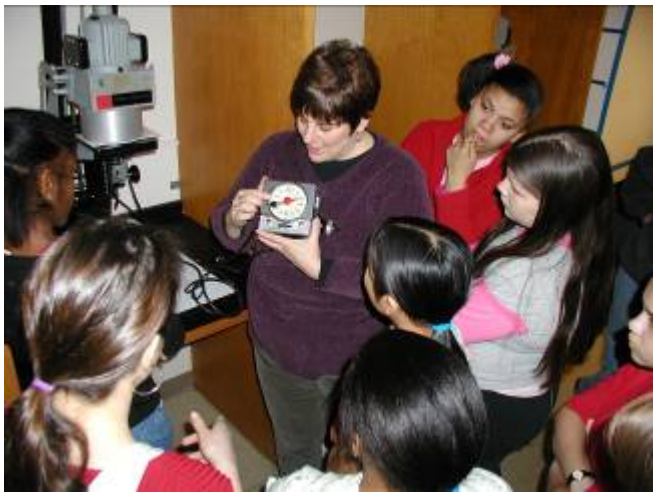

*Figure 4.* Learning in the darkroom

**Serendipity: How did that happen?**

Both media, clay and photography, are prone to the unexpected result. This is a particularly exciting situation where something unpredictable happens that opens/propels the individual to new insights and learning, pushing the learner to the next level of skill, knowledge, or content. Also known as the "happy accident" or "the decisive moment,"[4] this kind of sudden clarity of insight usually only occurs when the individual already knows at least a little about the processes involved in order to recognize both the usefulness/goodness of what occurred and its disconnect from what they thought should have happened. The next step involves control and replication, which includes systematic analysis of the steps already taken in consultation with more experienced practitioners and texts.

Why are these fields prone to serendipity? In part, this may be due to the technology, machinery and tools that extend the limitations of the body, the ceramist's hands and the photographer's eye. It may also be because of the number of variables and delicacy of balance involved in the chemical processes: changing any one of the variables can change the results in dramatic ways. In Albertson's 2001 study, several of the artists interviewed declared that the unexpected result was a particularly strong motivating factor. Artist-entrepreneur Alan Bennett explained:

> There's always a chance of a surprise, getting something better than you imagined. There's nothing like opening up the kiln and there it is, whole and complete. It's pretty wild, for me anyway, and then you want another one. (Albertson, 2001, p. 166)

Similarly when making a series of photographic portraits, students may inadvertently position their subjects in such a way as to find themselves pointing their camera lenses into the sun or light source. They are often surprised and pleased with the resulting portrait silhouettes, and they may practice this technique again and again, looking for the simplicity of form made possible by this technique. On the other hand, students may be very disappointed by the facial details rendered invisible with this arrangement of light source, and these students may work to eliminate this 'problem' by paying close attention to the relationships among the camera, the subject, and the light source. In Figure 3, the silhouetted image by Sebastian, (age 12), of his father is part of a silhouette series he created after inadvertently making several portrait exposures of his friends and family that resulted in similar images. Sebastian found the dramatic results very pleasing and

[4] This phrase was coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson, but is also related to Gardner's (1993) "crystallizing moment' when an individual suddenly understands with intense clarity that they are well-suited to the field of study.

went on to make several outstanding images with this lighting technique in a very purposeful manner.

*Figure 5.* Sebastian's father in silhouette

These events can be powerful hooks because once experienced, learners usually want more. This serendipity has the potential to bring together all the elements that the learners are struggling to achieve, pushing them past what they could previously imagine wanting. *How did that happen?* The tease that these kinds of experiences provide suggest the next steps in learning. Again, Alan Bennett explains that he keeps his "mistakes": "Even though I did not like what I got, I might like it a couple of years later" (Albertson, 2001, p. 162). Innate curiosity is a powerful motivator.

**Function and Familiarity - Opportunities for Integrated Learning**

Both photography and ceramics are cross-curricular, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural. In terms of their interconnectedness, both media involve chemistry, physics, math, reading and story-telling, historical and cultural knowledge, organization, and sequential thinking. Ceramics was one of the first media used by humans, whereas the invention and popularization of photography completely altered the role of traditional modes of documentation and representation (drawing, painting, and printmaking).

In addition, photography and ceramics have historic and contemporary value in terms of their practical applications which results in an almost universal familiarity with some aspect of these fields. The importance of popular photography in the construction of our individual histories and identities– particularly though the family album – has been well documented (Bezencenet & Corrigan, 1986; Kenyon, 1992; Sontag, 1977; Spence and Holland, 1991). Every home has at least one family album and everyone has seen a

photo-portrait and/or posed for one. Journalistic images in newspapers, magazines, and online are abundant, and most of us have had the occasion to follow photographic illustrations that map out the steps in a mechanical process. These collections of photographs help students to understand the ways that this art form fits into their world and has value. Similarly, ceramic objects are also universally familiar. It is unlikely that anyone begins a day without touching objects recognizably made out of ceramic materials in every room of a house: functional ceramic pottery vessels, sinks and commodes, jewelry, and objects used for religious observance or ritual. Two examples are the cups and teapot used in the Japanese tea ceremony or the chalice and plate used in the transubstantiation ritual in Christian observance**.** Not only does everyone come into daily contact with ceramic objects, but most children's earliest experiences of manipulating materials involve play with mud, dough or some other modeling compound. Often this early tactile exploration evolves into the creation of figures that are used for narrative play.[5]

Because successful progress in these fields necessarily involves understanding the relationships among a complex web of ideas, both media place emphasis on this kind of integrated and contextualized thinking, the ability to see how various smaller components work together in creating a whole—is highly useful in life, if not in school. The rich historical, cultural and economic legacy of these art forms offers the learner many access points to the media depending on their interests and learning strengths. Yet there is also significant room to explore knowledge in less compartmentalized ways than is often the case in contemporary classrooms, where a drive for standardized questions and answers is increasingly the norm. The flexibility that these fields offer provides many opportunities for teachers to customize instruction to the interests, strengths and sophistication of particular learners.

An aspect of a powerful learning situation involves the learners' appreciation of the value and relevance of what s/he is learning. This most often occurs when the knowledge and skills are of practical use, universally familiar and potentially relevant to career decisions. Conversely, much standardized curricula negates this important aspect, and therefore is of little interest or meaning to students. When faced with activities that they feel do not have much purpose or relevance in their lives, why would students persevere to develop the skills they need to move forward?

In our experience teaching art to children or adult learners, we have observed that it is tremendously helpful if others not engaged in the learning, also place value on the

[5] According to Vivian Gussin Paley (1990), this early narrative play in essential for later academic skill development.

knowledge and skills being acquired. The reception of work created in these media by family members, friends and peers is exceptionally important in helping to re-engage students in learning and school life. When parents are impressed and surprised with the quality of a photographic portrait of family members or a beautiful and useful bowl that students bring home, learners gain a great deal of confidence and self-esteem. They feel valued and special, very much in contrast to the regular feelings of inadequacy often experienced by those with challenges in other academic pursuits, like language arts or math.

## Art vs. Craft

Photographic and ceramic arts have often been considered "second class" in the craft vs. fine art debates and have been marginalized in the art world and therefore in schools. Both areas have struggled to carve out a place within the fine art academy. The good news is that this secondary status may have rendered these fields invisible to the educational movements that make life difficult for atypical learners because of frequent high stakes testing, national standards and the accountability movement (Howard, 2001; Kohn, 2000; Meier, 2002; Meier & Wood, 2004). This invisibility may account for the preservation of an apprenticeship organization of learning, as the pressure on art teachers to conform to outdated versions of nineteenth century "banking models" (Friere, 1970; Shor,1992) of classroom practice and curricular organization may be less intense.

*Figure 6.* Image of Noel Coward by E. Steichen, 1932

Those who appreciate these arts for their expressive and cultural value can find in either field a tradition of work that straddles or passes freely between the craft and art 'divide'. Production in these media can be both practical and aesthetic. Portrait artists like Steichen, Karsh, Liebowicz or Keïta could be commissioned to photograph an individual. The resulting portrait could serve a practical function: documentation of a specific moment in history, or used as a journalistic illustration. At the same time, any of these images might be considered for their aesthetic properties, alongside a Stewart painting or a Rodin bust in a museum or gallery collection, critiqued for their

aesthetic, expressive and cultural qualities. For example, in Figure 6, this Steichen portrait of Noel Coward would have certainly made it into the glamour pages of magazines like *Vanity Fair*, however, it stands as an elegant study in light and shape.

*Figure 7.* Foil fired sculptural Vessel Piece by Gary Greenberg.

A similar dualism, referencing both function and aesthetic/cultural content, can be seen in the work of many contemporary ceramists. Don Reitz, Val Cushing, James Leedy, the late Peter Voulkus and many younger artists, such as Gary Greenberg refer directly to the vessel form and the concerns that go along with function, to create sculptures that are highly prized by art critics for their aesthetic value. In Figure 7, see an example a non-functional sculptural piece, referencing the historical ceramic vessel.

**Classroom Dynamics—Freedom and Structure**

Learning in the photography and ceramics studios require that the teacher create a learning environment that carefully balances freedom and structure (Davidson, 2000; Stokes, 2006). This is particularly important for struggling learners who require a clear and sequenced set of manageable steps to help keep them from becoming overwhelmed. It also allows them the freedom to express their creative ideas and find unique paths to problem solving. This has to do with the expressive as well as the highly technical requirements of each art form. The model for learning has more to do with practicing doing the work of an artist:[6] problem-finding and then problem-solving (Getzels & Czikszentimihalyi, 1976). For example, a problem set for a student might be to make a strong, leak-proof vessel that can be easily lifted in one hand by utilizing the soft-slab method. The surface treatment must be functional and tell a story about how the vessel

[6] Robert Fried in the chapter "A Passion for Content" in *The Passionate Teacher*, pages 51-69, advocates course content for all levels that is in effect a slice of the work of a professional practitioner. He was not directly discussing art, but other academic fields, like science, math, social sciences, writing, etc.

should be used. Students would then be required to problem-solve: there are many possible acceptable solutions. Students may chose to create an object that is designed to contain a particular substance or for a particular person. They may use any surface decoration or method that would not interfere with the use and cleaning of the vessel while also communicating information about the functionality of the vessel. Students may decide to make a handle or not, and the shape, size and texture of the object might be left open. These choices can be highly motivating because this is where individuals can be creative. The restrictions become a puzzle to solve, giving structure to the learning. As learners gain expertise, they take over more and more of the creative problem-finding process, thereby moving them towards more artistic autonomy.

Similarly in photography, a teacher might ask students to use a particular kind of film and learn how to develop it a particular way, but the content might have a very open theme. These open- ended themes, such as *My Neighborhood* or *The Last Chance* can allow for the creation of imagery of a highly personal nature. This content may have great meaning to the students, helping to motivate them to master the technical skills needed to realize their ideas and to triumph over failures or frustrations that are part of the process of attaining mastery.

These examples of activities that balance freedom and structure, contrast sharply with curricula characterized by activities where there is one single 'correct' response. Faced with this sort of limiting curricula, students often ask, "Is this right? Is this what you want me to do?" or alternatively they blindly complete the assignment as quickly and painlessly as possible, forgetting what they did soon after they have completed the tasks (Albertson, 2001; Davidson, 2000). Because these sorts of activities leave little room for personal input or expression, many students simply go through the motions, or as Robert Fried (1995) suggests, they become adept at "playing the game of school"(p. 189). Playing this game does not result in engagement in or excitement about the subject matter or the learning process, and it is exactly the sort of resistance that could be diminished in all school environments by studying the ways that students become connected to learning in the art studio.

## Permission to Fail

All arts are risk-taking adventures, and failure in photography and the ceramic arts is a given. Whether it has more to do with the learning relationships described above or because of the technical steps that students must master to move beyond the most basic results, we have found that students studying photography and ceramics are more willing to take risks, try things that they don't already know, fail sometimes, and yet try again. This was a particularly important theme in Albertson's (2001) study. All of the

accomplished ceramists identified learning how to cope with frustration and failure as a particularly essential, and transferable learning experience. Michael Sherrill, one of the accomplished ceramists, explained it best:

> This is one of the things that I probably have learned (from ceramics): if you don't figure out how to gain from even a bad experience, then you smother underneath the avalanche of this crap, you know? Having a bit of hope and optimism about things is really important to pull you through. I would not be here without this attitude. (Albertson, 2001, p. 120-121)

Failure seems less biting when the equipment or unfamiliar processes move the blame one step away from the individual. It certainly is less crippling when learning relationships give students the courage to explore, when teachers in these subject areas make it clear that mistakes are simply part of the learning process, and that the learner will eventually get it right.

There are clear consequences if the technical processes involved in making a photograph or ceramic object are not properly sequenced or well carried out. Cause and effect are clear and absolute; no concept is good enough to survive poor execution. These consequences are unrelated to the teacher's judgment or authority, which helps to reduce the chance of developing student/teacher power struggles. These struggles are detrimental and often interfere with the learning process for all students, and especially for fragile learners.

Additionally, technical errors can have an impact on assessment and on how students working in these disciplines feel about failure and perseverance. When students who are accustomed to failing in school encounter problems with the technical aspects of their work in photography or clay, there is something less personal about that failure. These technical failures are somehow not as devastating to students because they are just that, technical failures, and say very little about a students' ability to create and to come up with wonderful ideas (Duckworth, 1987). Just as separating content from execution when grading an essay is recommended for students with literacy problems (Long, Austin & Bowen, 1994 a, b), separating technical qualities (design and execution) from rich content gives students something that feels doable, within their power to control, resulting in the courage to try again.

**Relational Education – Apprentices and Master Artists**

According to Herbert Kohl (1984) there are two component parts to good teaching. The first part consists of helping learners to recognize and appreciate their strengths and interests. The second part involves using those strengths and interests to teach material that they do not already know, helping students to build up a store of knowledge which in turn supports further learning. In both cases, a productive respectful relationship is essential between learner and teacher. To many at-risk learners, this relationship is one that has failed for various reasons. Working with a master in either discipline offers students the opportunity to learn from an experienced professional, while developing their own vision/voice and approach to the medium. The dialogue that takes place both about the master's work and the students' development can build real bonds/relationships that can be extremely valuable in helping to connect disengaged learners to the school environment, and to learning in general. Learning is not a hierarchical ladder from teacher to student, as each learns from the other. Alan Bennett described to Albertson (2001) a particularly powerful learning experience that he had with his ceramics teacher. This teacher was experimenting with a new firing technique and allowed the students to help him. Because the teacher was excited, the students understood how important the new knowledge was.

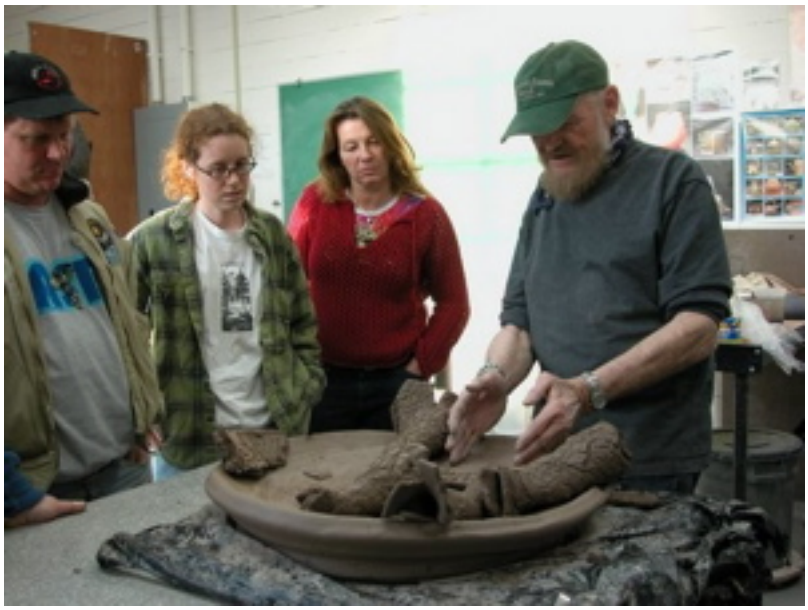

*Figure 8.* James Leedy leading a ceramics demonstration at the University of Maine.

Even fifteen years later, Alan Bennett can detail the experiment, what he learned and how he has since applied that information.

A major protective factor identified by much of the literature on 'resiliency' to adversity in children and adolescents to adversity has to do with the support of a cohesive community, particularly when combined with the caring mentorship of a non-parental adult in that community (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001; Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1989). In this case, individuals allow themselves to be guided by their teachers

because they know and trust them (Agne, 1999; Pariser, 1999; 1990**).** They know them enough to trust their expertise, trust their good intentions towards the learner (Howard, 2005), and believe that the teacher has the skill and desire to get to know how they can best be guided. What is more, because the flow of learning travels both ways, this knowledge/trust is mutual. The master/teacher also gets to know and trust the learners. The organization of the photographic and ceramic studios may play a significant role both in the development of important life skills and in encouraging essential community support. This organization, traditionally known as an apprentice/master artist model, is common in 'craft' areas such as ceramics, photography, metal-smithing, etc. While community-building and the encouragement of productive mentor relationships are not directly the intended purpose of apprenticeship-models of teaching and learning, this way of organizing education can result in enhanced rapport, trust, and understanding between the teachers and students.

It would be absurd to imply that the importance of a caring teacher who is highly knowledgeable, an active learner and practitioner backed by solid 'teacher-craft,' and the attitude that all children can learn, are qualities that are unique to photography or ceramics teachers. They are not. Wherever excellent teaching and learning environments are created, be they art studios or automotive technology classes, we believe that a "pedagogy of care" (Noddings, 1992; Agne, 1999; Pariser, 1990) positions students as active, confident learners, and as partners in the creative/learning process (Howard, 2005). Just as importantly, it is essential that we, as experts in our fields, are ourselves excited about our domains and furthering our own learning and progress. This is a stance that we believe is necessary for any meaningful exchange of ideas in a teaching/learning environment, and especially integral to success for disengaged students.

## Conclusion

All artistic fields contain the possibility of several of these qualities and components, and certainly there are other fields outside of the arts, such as science, history, or mathematics that also might include all of them. Our point is rather that none of the qualities of the teaching and learning environment considered above really has that much to do with clay or film, per se. but rather they grow out of the social dynamics and approach to classroom practice that are common and observable in most of these art studios. We suspect that this is in part because ceramics and photography (when they have not been cut from the school curriculum altogether) have been spared some of the less 'helpful' attention recently directed at other fields, such as language arts and mathematics, in order to increase their efficiency and consistency. In other words, the relatively low status of photography and ceramics education may have protected them, so far. Thus intact, they provide a dynamic starting point from which teachers and school administrators can

readily observe and consider approaches to classroom practice that have proven to engage those students who are on the margins in most other of their classroom experiences.

In the process of examining our own and others' teaching practice in terms of good success with stressed and disengaged learners**,** we also noticed that the qualities of the learning environment in the clay and photography studios are more directly related to the sort of learning that takes place outside of the contemporary classroom—in the home, the shop, the garden, on the playing field or in the community.

This is a much more positive, inclusive model of teaching and learning that takes into account the fact that there are all kinds of students and all kinds of ways to gain knowledge and skill. The suggested question might be: Why not? Why can't we re-organize all classrooms so that an array of talents and interests, ways of learning from experience, and the interconnectedness of knowledge are valued? Why can't all subjects, both inside and outside the arts be taught in a manner that promotes active learning, builds trusting, respectful relationships and values multiple ways of knowing/understanding the world. By exploring the art studio as a positive model, we see that constructive change can be accomplished in subjects ranging from science to social studies so that all classrooms will regularly include learning labs, peer teaching, and hands-on problem-solving and finding. We believe that all knowledge can be drawn, not with light or clay specifically, but with the joy and pleasure of discovery in a learning environment that nurtures respect, recognizes unique ideas, and opens pathways to engagement.

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