

Statement of Practice

Full Circle

Duncan Hooson

Duncan Hooson, maker, writer, Co-director of Clayground Collective, and dynamic teacher in adult and higher education, has been based in London since 1987. Working primarily with clay and renowned for his large-scale, wheel-thrown pots and totemic sculptures, he is known for working to commission in the public realm and site-specific work for schools and hospitals. He also values working collaboratively with artists and performers on cross-arts initiatives. In 2013 Clayground Collective won a Crafts Skills Award for “engaging new and diverse audiences.”

Abstract

This article traces the importance that adult education has played in my own career in enabling me to enter higher education and to earn an income from teaching through clay, where I enjoy introducing people to the possibilities that the medium can offer. My practice includes over twenty years teaching ceramics at Morley College, an adult education institution in London, which I have found highly rewarding.

Keywords: Morley College, Central Saint Martins, evening class, ceramics education, collaborative practice

Stoke-on-Trent, 1975: “Pits or Pots?”

This was the career officer’s question to me as I stood in line with the rest of my class. I could either go down the coalmines or into the ceramic industry, as these were the only available jobs at the time. Neither appealed to me. So, I began my journey to find something else.

Having already turned down a position in the design department at Wedgwood at the age of 15 (oh the arrogance of youth!), the wide and beautiful open spaces surrounding Stoke-on-Trent beckoned, as a van lad on my

Dad's bread run round the local shops and farms. I loved doing this for a short time.

In 1977, aged 18, I joined a ceramics evening class in Newcastle-under-Lyme; I chose ceramics as it was the only subject at school that would both shut me up and change my attitude. Art, and especially pottery, provided a refuge amongst other subjects I had little or no interest in at the time. The evening course was held in the art and design department of the sixth-form college over the road from my old secondary school. The link between the two institutions had never been made clear to me throughout my entire time at school.

My tutor on the course, Claire Heath, made ceramics both exciting and relevant to me. A new world opened up before my eyes, which was welcoming, accessible, and had life-changing potential. It was an added bonus that I found it engaging and enjoyable. I know it is a cliché, but the sentiment that "it only takes one person to see potential to alter your life" really rang true for me, as Claire kindled my interest in ceramics, which I will always cherish. During the classes she effectively demonstrated various techniques and possessed boundless enthusiasm, even taking the group to the pub after the class had ended. I also discovered a mixed group of individuals with radically different lives and occupations to my own, yet we shared this interest in ceramics. I don't remember all their names, but I can still recall their faces.

After a year, Claire came to speak to my parents to convince them that I would not be wasting my time should I follow a two-year foundation course. I had wasted my energies on quite a few other things before this. The course enabled me to gain the relevant qualifications for further training

in ceramics: in year one I got a taste of some foundation subjects, and by year two I was able to complete the Art Foundation program, a luxury by today's standards. This led to a degree in Bristol, which I started in 1980, where I was tutored amongst others by David Robinson, Walter Keeler, George Rainer, Nick Homoky, and Mo Jupp—all influential, internationally renowned makers in the areas of research, drawing, functional studio pottery, and innovative sculptural practice. The course offered a wide breadth of knowledge and practice.

In 1984 I enrolled on an MA at the newly opened ceramics course in Cardiff (at the South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education). At this time there were about thirty full-time undergraduate programs in ceramics and three MA courses in Britain. The subject had gone through a period of expansion, helped by the fact that the majority of secondary schools had pottery departments.

My first paid job after college was as a technician at the teacher training college in Cardiff, which had a very active ceramics section. A job at my former department in Bristol enabled me to continue making in a studio environment and in 1988 I benefited from a Crafts Council "Setting Up" grant and I established my first studio in London at the South Bank Crafts Centre.

My first teaching job came in 1988, at Morley College—an exemplary adult education centre near Waterloo in London. I started by filling in for my very close friend Steve Forster, who had quickly established an exhibiting profile with galleries but had fallen in love with a Spaniard and was looking to move to Barcelona. I eventually took over his class. The other staff were Annette Welch,



Fig 1 Ceramics evening class at Morley College, London. Photograph: Duncan Hooson.

Jill Crowley, and Angus Suttie, who were exhibiting both nationally and internationally at the time with figurative and object-based sculptural ceramics. My functional and sculptural approach with the wheel offered something new to the department. Angus fell ill and I was asked to substitute for him, eventually taking over after his very sad and premature death. The two evening classes provided me with enough income to continue making work for exhibition. I found the classes stimulating. They were very structured and enabled me to work through the processes involved in core techniques—some of which I had not learnt during my

own studio practice. I also became more fascinated with glaze technology than I had been at college.

I also started to teach on degree courses as a visiting lecturer; but I found the students unmotivated, and I think I was too attentive to their projects and to finding solutions before they were ready to receive them—I was denying the students the space to discover for themselves. I quickly found these forays into undergraduate expressions of creativity unsatisfying; I absorbed their projects while I was still at a very early stage of development myself. I decided it was too early for me to be involved, so I stopped.

However, I did carry on with teaching at Morley College. I found most of the adults who were coming to the classes fascinating, as they all had such different jobs and I'm sure it reminded me of my own experience as a beginner. Their keen interest, motivation, and ideas were complementary to my own. While on my MA I had become increasingly interested in Art Brut, or "raw art," of the 1950s. This was French artist Jean Dubuffet's own interpretation of today's well-known and publicized category, "Outsider Art." Whether rightly or wrongly, I felt that I did not want to teach in a formal setting where the work was strongly academic. I could not help feeling at the time that making work should be more about compulsion and enjoyment, rather than being driven by market pressure and qualifications. At evening classes, once students had been shown the techniques off they went to explore their creative potential.

Morley College Adult Education Centre is one of the oldest in the country, originally founded at the back of the Old Vic theater circa 1900. Its evening classes provided opportunities for the working classes to obtain an education at an affordable cost in the context of limited compulsory state provision. The classes and "penny lectures" improved employment opportunities or allowed attendees to gain knowledge or satisfy their curiosity.

With this heritage I feel privileged to be the head of the thriving Ceramics Department, where we have a newly refurbished studio and modern materials and equipment to explore the range of contemporary ceramics. As an outward-facing department we work increasingly in partnership across the college and cultivate

a diverse range of external relationships. These include recent master classes and educational programs with the Craft Potters Association; cross-art initiatives with Pakarma that look particularly at the issue of sustainability across the Morley site; and workshops at the Southbank Centre's Festival of Neighbourhood in collaboration with Southbank Mosaics.

I feel that the opportunity to engage with a creative art form should be afforded to anyone at any stage of their life, and the evening class is the perfect conduit for this. The Craft Council's "Craft in an Age of Change" (February 2012)—"a major survey of contemporary craft at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century"¹—found that a quarter of those surveyed could be classified as "career changers," those who began their working lives in other careers before taking up craft as a profession. In addition, 22 percent of those surveyed, who are quaintly referred to as "returners," are makers who trained in art, craft, or design but who did not pursue craft as a first career, following another path after university or college before "returning" to craft later on. These summations reflect the diversity of students that I teach at Morley. However, while many that I teach do go on to pursue further formal academic BA or MA qualifications (such as at the Royal College of Art), others find a meaningful value in taking time out of their stressful working lives to engage in something "other," in and of itself, that is enjoyable, meditative, and creative.

My current crop of students ranges from 20- to 80-year-olds. Interestingly, we have had a number of undergraduates attending who are seeking to complement their chosen degrees in graphics, illustration, and fine art.



Fig 2 Ceramics evening class at Morley College, London. Photograph: Duncan Hooson.

They engage in three-dimensional modeling and making in clay in order to help them develop ideas, as often there is no ceramics provision at their own institutions. While the careers, backgrounds, and motivations are different, there is a consistent compulsion among the students to work and engage with clay.

Many of our students set up their own workshops alongside classes at Morley, such has been the lure of working with the material and selling their work at major and

local craft fairs and retail outlets. I have always endeavored to create the right environment to enable students to have the sense of freedom and autonomy when making, while giving them support and a steer. It is fantastic to see the level of confidence and achievement that develops in students as a result of learning new ceramic skills.

Looking Forward

At this stage of my life I feel I have a depth of experience to share, partly as a result

of my evening-class teaching. Much of my teaching draws from my own experience with ceramics and my portfolio of work as artist-in-residence in schools, hospitals and hospices and in fulfilling commissions for the public realm and making pieces for exhibitions. I also share my knowledge as Co-director of Clayground Collective (an independent arts organization that teaches through clay) with Julia Rowntree. We have been working with the Professor of Surgical Education, Roger Kneebone, from Imperial College, the new Wellcome Foundation's Engagement Fellow and Professor. We have been assessing the similarities of process and technique between surgery and ceramics, primarily to enable his practicing students to become more skilled and sensitive to working with their hands and to develop a more empathetic approach to touch and to cause and effect. Roger Kneebone is acutely aware of the benefits of working with one's hands in terms of physical and mental well-being and acuity. What is interesting, however, is that before working with Roger many surgeons and medical professionals have been curious about attending my classes at Morley. As with other students, learning ceramics in one's free time seems a good chance to develop and extend the skills, abilities, and knowledge learnt through your core occupation.

I am keen that the ceramics department at Morley engages a broad cross-section of ages, abilities, and motivations. Therefore, beyond the evening- and day-class program, there are additional activities ranging from family pottery to *raku* and bespoke short courses that specialize in specific techniques, such as throwing and glaze technology. I want to introduce our students to other

professional ceramicists to broaden their outlook and understanding of what clay is and what can be done with it. So, we have recently appointed Chris Keenan, Carina Ciscato, and Robert Cooper to teach in the department. This program has grown out of the desire and thirst for learning from the student body—their part-time interest has grown into something more significant than just a class they attend for recreation.

Lifelong Learning is important to me. I was part of the steering group for the Craft Council's "Firing Up" program, which set out to strengthen ceramic education in schools. Coordinated by Tony Quinn, "Firing Up" aims to rejuvenate ceramics within school curricula, particularly for schools that have previously closed their ceramic workshops. In addition, it aims to encourage students to consider ceramics as a career option and introduces them to regional universities, makers, and cultural institutions. Ceramics has become what was known as a "niche subject area" or "endangered discipline" at HEI (Higher Education Institution) level, and "Firing Up" aims to reverse this trend. Maybe things have to be on the decline before people realize their inherent value.

The teaching at Morley coexists with my involvement with the Ceramic Design degree course at Central Saint Martins (CSM/University of the Arts London), led by Kathryn Hearn and assisted by Tony Quinn and Rob Kessler. The course, with its historical pedigree, equips students with an extraordinary skill set and an understanding of the wealth of career and professional opportunities that an understanding of clay can have across the cultural and industrial sectors. The course program is diverse, covering a broad range of techniques. It is a



Fig 3 Ceramics evening class at Morley College, London. Photograph: Duncan Hooson.

very different ceramic education at degree level from the one I encountered thirty years ago, where the only ambition and aspiration seemed to be a focus on exhibiting in galleries or selling through retail outlets or craft fairs.

As a maker you are continuously learning. While it is important for me to be proactive in seeking out opportunities to create work, it is as important that I feel that I am learning from others through teaching and being part of the collaborative and collegiate settings at Morley and CSM. The teaching informs my practice.

I find that the students from both Morley and CSM are hungry to learn beyond the

“classroom” setting and I want to share my experiences of informal learning and my understanding of the “expanded field.” For example, six Morley students recently attended the ICF (International Ceramic Festival) in Aberystwyth. They met three CSM students who had gone to work as volunteers. Recently, six CSM students worked with me as part of Clayground Collective on our “Clay Cargo” project—a journey by barge from London Kings Cross to Stoke-on-Trent following the canal route initially funded by Josiah Wedgwood. I also recently worked with Mario D’Olivera, a longstanding student from Morley, on a ceramics demonstration program at the

Royal Festival Hall as part of the Southbank Centre's Festival of Neighbourhood. I am in the process of setting up a one-year glaze technology research post at Morley for a recent graduate from the CSM course. I think the clunky institutional term is "cascade learning" but I feel everyone benefits through sharing facilities, ideas, and success. I feel it is important to consider both sets of students for involvement in live projects and the provision of effective ways of supporting students in the transition to professional practice if that's what they want. I endeavor to alert Morley students to the range of ceramic practice beyond the evening class. Though they may not engage with the depth expected of a student following a brief for an assessed unit of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, they take the subject seriously enough to devote extra time to it beyond the class. In the class they explore techniques, take creative risks, and experiment with a wide range of clays, glaze textures, and varied surfaces. Some also have disposable income and are in a position to purchase ceramics with this gained knowledge via their engagement and participation through evening classes.

While there are considerable concerns as to how craft, and particularly ceramics, is integrated or even considered in school curricula and HEI programs, there does seem to be a thriving and healthy interest in clay. Student numbers for ceramics at Morley are on the increase due to its new and expanded program. It does feel like an exciting time to be working with clay, and especially within a community of

practitioners who share their knowledge, which always seems to astonish those who approach the medium via different artistic disciplines or completely different career routes.

I still enjoy teaching adult-education classes that provide a flattened hierarchy and non-judgmental space for people to make. Whilst there are a plethora of reasons as to why people attend Morley I feel we have come full circle in terms of the original premise of the college and the origination of its penny lectures—a place within London to develop an interest in a creative subject. The classes offer a place to meet like-minded people and offer students a chance to broaden their outlook and understanding of ceramic practice—which may or may not lead on to a professional career.

Note

I Crafts Council website: <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/professional-development/research-and-information/research-reports> (accessed August 13, 2013).

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