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Reviving Clay in the Classroom: A Hand-Building Handbook for Art Educators

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Abstract

In 2018, the Ohio Arts Education data project found that of the 1,318,168 students enrolled in visual arts courses in the state of Ohio only 2.2% were taking ceramics. The use of clay, in students of all ages, develops fine motor skills, provides a safety net for trial and error style learning, supports problem-solving skills, and encourages creativity in an art as play environment. Current educational pedagogy suggests that these skills are beneficial to all learners, especially those with unique needs. If the cognitive, physical, and artistic advantages of using clay are well documented, why is it not being taught in the classroom?

The absence of ceramic specific instruction can be attributed to a singular issue— a lack of resources for educators. To combat this issue and promote the inclusion of clay in future curriculum, I have compiled a guide to hand-building with clay. This digital resource is free to access and includes lesson plan examples, video tutorials, classroom layout suggestions, hand-building techniques, and alternative material lists. This paper answers the question, why clay? It also explores my purpose, process, and product.

Keywords and phrases: Honors Thesis, Undergraduate Research, Creative Research Project, Ceramics Education, K-12 Art, Art Education, Clay

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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I must also thank Madison County education professionals Kimberly Proffitt, Courtney Story, Mary Turner, Cathy Cornett, and Sandy Sullivan. These exceptional women facilitated my field work experience and supported my success in the classroom. They observed my lessons, answered endless questions, and participated in interviews related to this project.

Unforeseen circumstances related to COVID-19 complicated this process; however, my family and friends encouraged me to continue forward. To Karissa Hunt, Quinn Thompson, and Kelsie Head, who spent hours listening to my aimless ramblings about clay and reminding me of my purpose, thank you. To Terry and Jessica Owens, who allowed me to transform their home into a clay studio, thank you. To my fellow artists, namely Morgan Winter, Elissa Conkwright, Carsen Bryant, and Andria Banker, whose creative contributions made this project possible, thank you.

The Purpose

The cognitive, physical, and artistic advantages of using clay in the classroom are well documented; however, it is the resources required to teach ceramics that outweigh the benefits of using the material. Issues of storage and budget, for example, are among the challenge's art teachers face when attempting to include three-dimensional mediums. To remove the barriers preventing educators from incorporating clay in their curriculum, I will compile a free guide for hand-building with clay. Targeting beginning clay teachers, this handbook will include material lists, lesson plan examples, video tutorials, classroom layout suggestions, hand-building techniques, kiln-firing tips and additional resources necessary to ensure success in the classroom. Before I begin compiling the handbook, I will establish the importance of teaching clay and the significance of this project.

Although this call for a return to hand-crafting functional and sculptural art echoes William Morris of the Arts and Craft Movement, modern research and educational pedagogy champion the merits of this material. The use of clay develops fine motor skills, provides a safety net for trial and error style learning, improves hand-eye coordination, supports problem-solving skills, and encourages creativity in an art as play environment (Kaur, 2018). Current educational pedagogy suggests that these skills are beneficial to all learners, especially those with unique needs. Engaging multiple senses in the learning process helps students connect new content to experiences in their long-term memory.

In a personal interview, Kimberly Proffitt, an art teacher at Clark-Moores Middle School in Kentucky, states that clay is a favorite discipline of her students. When

surveyed thirty-three of her thirty-five students preferred clay to all other mediums. She explained that teaching to student interest prevents disruptive behaviors and encourages students to stay on task. The support for ceramics also extends beyond individual classrooms. According to the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, "Engaging body and mind in imaginative inquiry, clay connects us to authentic tactile and cognitive experiences. Ceramic art shapes our interactions with one another while connecting us to cultural traditions, knowledge, and innovations" (2014). If the inclusion of clay in the classroom benefits students academically, physically, and artistically it is my role to guide educators on methods to promote clay use.

The Problem

Analyzing statistics from the state of Ohio, which is considered an accurate representation of the greater United States, it is evident that this is not the case. According to the Ohio Arts Education data project in 2018, within the discipline of Visual Art there are only 338 schools offering ceramics. The total course enrollment is only 29,571 students. This means that of the 1,318,168 students enrolled in visual arts courses in the state of Ohio, only 2.2% are taking ceramics. This is not to say that clay is not being used in the general art classroom; however, it does illustrate the lack of ceramic specific instruction in art education. More than half, 58.7%, of students enrolled in visual art courses are elementary students. It is at this level that the concept of "good art" is defined by artistic development and success in two-dimensional mediums. This problematic concept discourages aging students from participation in the arts, as they discredit their artistic value based on their ability to draw.

In the anthology, *Child development in Art*, Claire Golomb elaborates on this point. She asserts, “It is somewhat paradoxical that drawing, a medium that lacks the third dimension, has been the focus of studies that examine the child’s evolving three-dimensional representational conceptions, and that work in the three-dimensional medium of clay has lagged behind” (1997). Golomb’s research indicates that clay should be used as a measurement of artistic development in children and is perhaps more suitable for teaching concepts such as space, form, and balance than its two-dimensional counterparts. If modeling with clay can be used as a measurement of artistic development, then teaching the medium, in turn, can accelerate and refine student ability. This research also contrasts the importance of clay with the accepted standard of drawing and proves that strong graphic art relies on a thorough understanding of three-dimensional elements, often explored in sculpture.

The Process

The idea for this handbook resulted from a personal need for information that thorough research could not provide in a free, contemporary, concise manner. I understood the benefits of using clay with students, but I did not know where to begin. Regardless of my desire to teach ceramics, as a first-year art teacher I lacked the time, resources, and capacity to include clay in my classroom curriculum. I had a kiln, but no firing guide. I was unsure what supplies were suitable for each age-group, and I was

operating on a limited budget. As I began seeking professional advice, I learned these issues are among the many faced by beginning and experienced educators alike. It was then that I determined to make my research findings and personal experience public, in the hopes that it would make the integration of clay into classroom curriculum more feasible.

Literary Review

As I sought answers for this dilemma, I discovered Josephine R. Krum's 1960 scholarly text, *Hand-Built Pottery*. This book provides educators with a guide for incorporating clay into their classroom as an expressive media. The author explains the importance of clay in sensory and fine arts education by addressing the unique ability of the material to develop tactile and visual senses simultaneously. She interweaves her argument, supported by historical references and educational pedagogy, with practical clay techniques and processes.

Her simplified yet effective drawings and descriptions make this text a must-have for beginning educators and a staple for hand-building ceramicists. Described best in the outlined purpose of this book, "What is presented here is not a recipe for working with clay, but a general guide which, to the alert and versatile teacher, will suggest many possibilities and adaptations for particular students and classroom situations" (Krum, 1960). A textbook of sorts, this guide equips educators who fear the medium, do not understand the processes, or are unsure how to implement clay in the classroom with all the necessary information to succeed!

Josephine Krum's *Hand-Built Pottery* was instrumental in the development and organization of my project. I chose this book solely because I have the same name as the

author; however, two pages into the text I realized that I share not only her name, but also her purpose. Krum supports the claims I intend to make with credible research and presents the information in a manner that is suitable for new teachers. Although I cherish this text, there are many aspects of my handbook that will be different.

In the sixty years since the publication of this text, new theories, updated resources, and color printing have expanded the possibilities of this guide. The advent of video means that fifteen black and white images are no longer necessary for a tutorial. Technological advancement makes this content more accessible. Online platforms, such as YouTube and Squarespace, reach wider audiences and are free to use. Krum's text included a wide range of clay related information that was not always cohesive. To avoid a similar shortcoming, I have worked to ensure my digital handbook is user friendly and clear.

Field Research

In addition to compiling resources to strengthen my argument, I have also conducted extensive field research in art classrooms. Within the last two years, I have observed and instructed art in five schools. I began in a high school art room that had a heavy ceramic focus and a substantial budget. There was a separate space for the kiln, clay, and glaze. Students were familiar with the material and created advanced work. As a beginning educator, I was excited and inspired!

My second placement was at a Title 1 middle school, where funding was limited, and classes were large. The art teacher at this school, Kimberly Proffitt, knew that her students loved working with clay and did everything possible to include it in her

curriculum. She taught a clay unit each nine-weeks to her seventh and eighth grade students. It was here that I learned how to fire an electric kiln and make creative, low-cost clay tools.

My most recent placements were in three elementary schools. One had no art program, another had art class but no kiln, and the final school had a kiln but no clay or glaze. Regardless of the limitations, art teachers at each location taught clay units. In the schools where firing work was not possible, because the volume of students and lack of resources, air dry clay was used as an alternative. The benefits of using clay in the classroom were most evident at this age level. Students who traditionally had trouble with behavior or staying on task excelled. Student morale leading up to the clay unit was undeniably high.

The efforts made by educators at each location were inspiring. I learned of teachers spending their paychecks on supplies, staying at the school on weekends to fire the kiln, and making alternative tools so their students could work with clay. I witnessed innovation, resourcefulness, and compassion. I hope that by compiling all that I have learned from these remarkable educators, I will ease the burden on future art teachers and make the inclusion of clay into classroom curriculum easier.

Creation of the Handbook

When deciding how to create this hand-building guide, I knew I wanted the final product to be as inexpensive and accessible as possible. I had considered creating a physical handbook with drawings, but the expense of printing and shipping were steep. Ultimately, a website was the best format to achieve my intended purpose. I chose

Squarespace to build my website on, because it was easy to navigate and had the most professional template options. I began with creating a page for every topic I hoped to include, which resulted in twenty-one total pages. From there I began adding written and visual content to each section.

I used images from my personal collection as well as images submitted by art students for the page headings. I synthesized previously selected research articles and excerpts from educational and professional websites for most of the written sections. The page descriptions, as well as the classroom storage and budgeting sections, were original contributions. The video tutorials were difficult to record. I had hoped to record students working organically in the ceramic studio at Eastern Kentucky University; however, the closure of in person classes due to COVID-19 made that impossible.

Initially I was discouraged and afraid I would be unable to complete my project. The videos and images were among the most important of my original contributions. After a brief conference with my mentor, I was reminded that unforeseen circumstances and limited resources do not cause artists to quit, but challenge artists to become more creative. The premise of my project is to equip art educators with the tools to succeed, even if those "clay tools" come from my kitchen. So, I began filming tutorials—not in the studio as I had anticipated—but from my home.

The limitations I encountered are not unlike those faced by practicing educators. Although SARS-CoV-2 is a new dilemma, a lack of space, resources, and knowledge of alternative materials is not. The completion of this project, from building the website to filming the videos, was not how I imagined it would be; however, the resulting product

was born out of authentic need and resourcefulness. In an odd way, the final product is more fulfilling of my original purpose.

The Product

The completed project is a website with twenty-one pages, twelve videos, and thirty-five images. There are four main headings: The Project, Clay Basics, Lesson Idea, and Resources. The Project section includes The Purpose and Contact pages (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). These pages give the viewer an insight into why this website was created. Beneath the Clay Basics heading, viewers can access Vocabulary, Clay Tools (fig. 4), Hand-building Techniques (fig.5), Glazing, Firing the Kiln, Reclaiming Clay, and Safety Procedures. This portion was intended to help educate educators. There is also a section for Lesson Ideas which is divided into Elementary, Middle, and High School. Figure 6 and 7 below depict images included in the Elementary section. The clay sushi (fig. 6) was created by a third-grade student during a lesson I taught on Pop Art and sculpture.

The final folder, or tab, on my Hand-Building Handbook website is simply titled "Resources". This is perhaps my favorite section, as it provides practical ideas and alternatives for incorporating clay in the classroom. Beneath the subheading "Inexpensive Alternative" (fig. 8), I included a video where I formed a cup using only my hands and tools found in my kitchen. Forks and knives replaced serrated ribs and needle tools. Plastic cards were used to smooth the surface. The idea for this video came during quarantine when art supply stores and studios were closed.

I wanted this website to be as professional as a printed version of the handbook would be. To do this I used a limited color palatte, high resolution images, and short videos. Unlike Josephine Krum, I did not make the handbook dense with research

citations. I made my argument for the use of clay in the classroom in this text, which is linked to the website, but kept the handbook itself user-friendly and straight-forward. I also intentionally arranged my pages of content into folders. These folders functioned as traditional chapter headings in a handbook would.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this handbook will continue to be a resource to educators well after the thesis process is complete. I have included current research and my teaching experience up until this point, but as research changes and I continue to learn this hand-building guide will also evolve. I also hope to eventually create a forum where other practicing professionals and artists can submit ideas and advice. Most importantly, as I move forward into the education field, I will take with me the intention of making ceramics more accessible. I will continue to work so that all students may experience clay in the classroom.

Appendix

Figure 1. Website Home Page

Figure 2. Purpose of Project

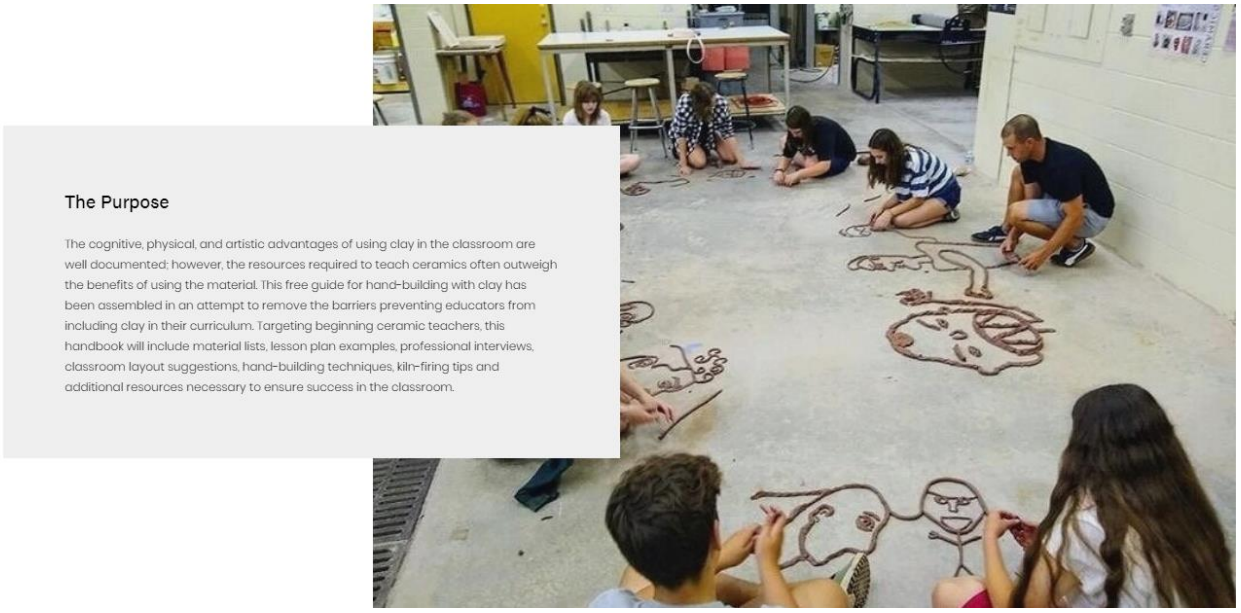

Figure 3. Contact Page

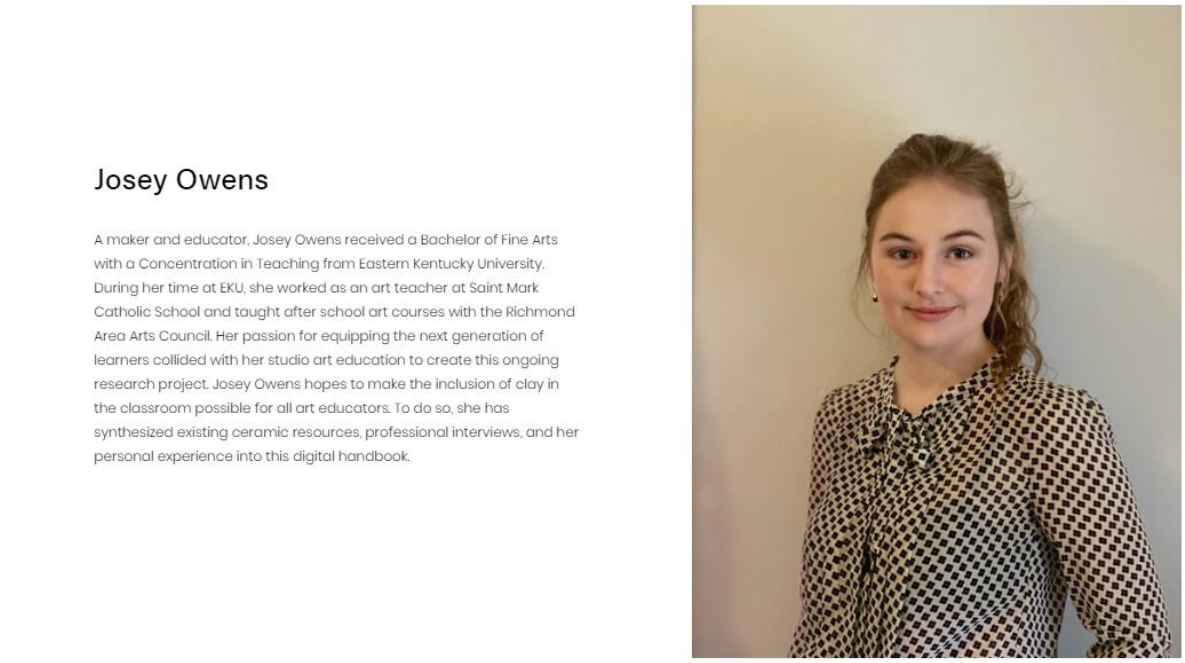

Figure 4. Clay Tools

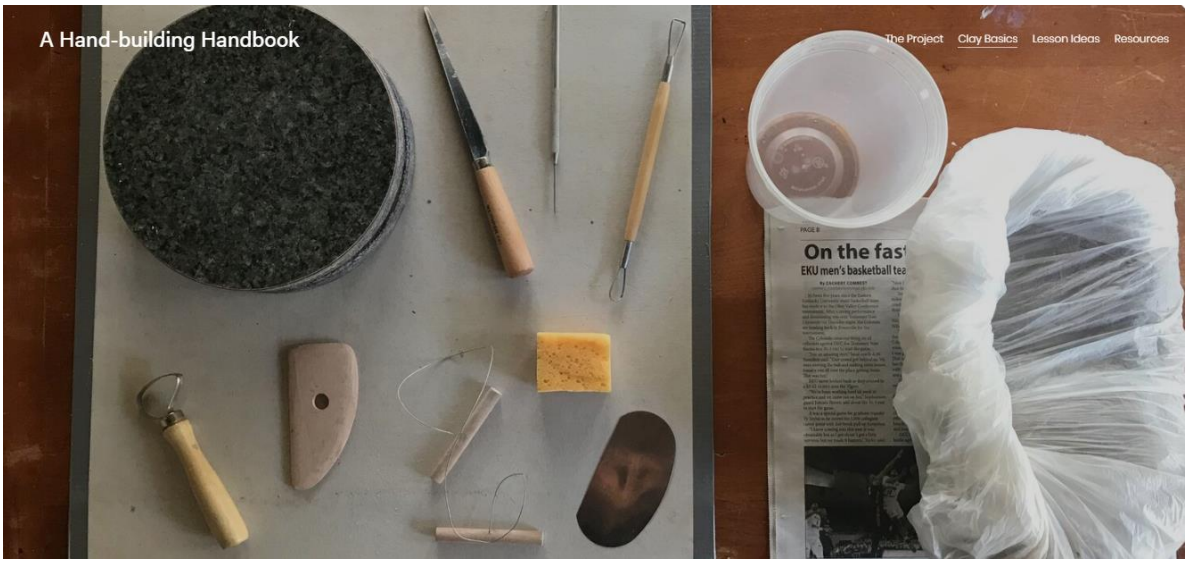

Figure 5. Hand-building Technique Page Featuring Videos

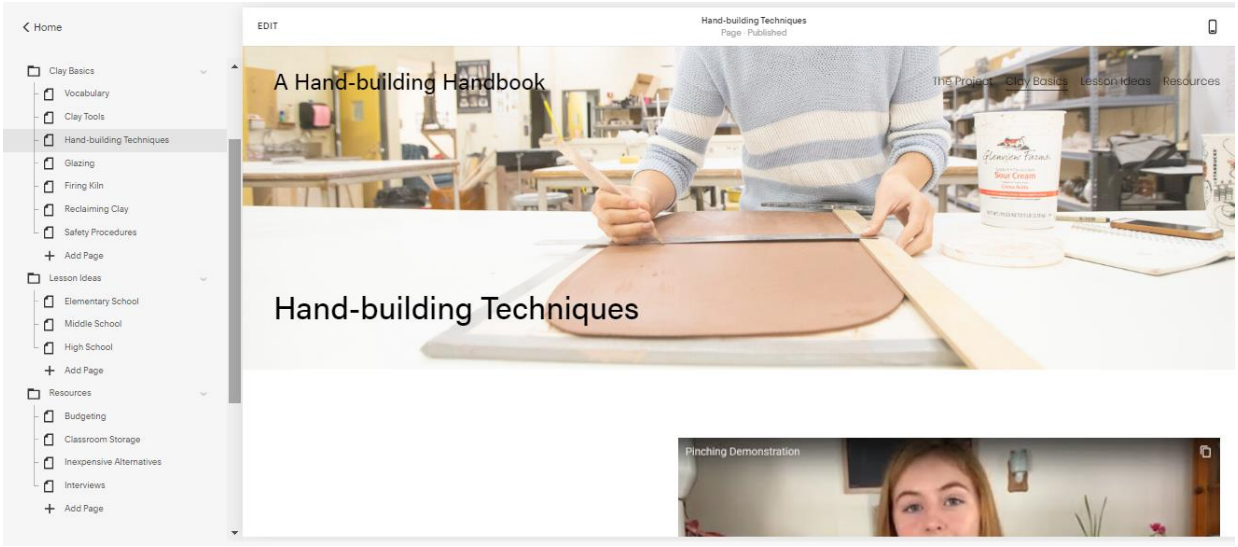

Figure 6. Elementary Art Lesson Example

Figure 7. Elementary Art Lesson Plan Example

Pop Art Clay Sculptures

Learning Objectives: I am learning to make sculptural clay art. I am learning to identify the difference between sculptural art and functional art. I am learning how to use clay tools.

Standard: 3rd (VA:Pr5.1.3) a. Exhibit developing ability in a variety of artistic, design, technical, and organizational roles, such as making compositional decisions, manipulating tools, and group planning in media arts productions.

Resources: Air dry clay (this project used a 1/2 lb of Crayola Air Dry Clay per student), paper plates or lunch trays, a variety of clay tools, a clean surface. PowerPoint for this lesson as linked below.

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1QNF9tPqoaIIPKC_1voeVauWlDuANuzLqMtU59A3MOdo/edit?usp=sharing

Procedures:

1. Welcome students at the door.

2. Greet students and ask them to sit on the carpet facing the board.

3. Let them know that we will be working with clay and that I am excited before beginning the presentation.

4. During the presentation:

- Slide 1: Introduce clear learning targets that support state standards.
- Slide 2: Relate to previously learned content to make learning meaningful and long-term.
- Slide 3: (2.3) I am including two examples of sculpture that affirm diverse cultures and multiple perspectives. Jun Kaneko is an incredibly successful Japanese artist living in Nebraska, and the Fearless Girl statue represents the courage of women in oppressive workplaces and environments.
- Slide 5/6: By choosing simple imagery, such as food, I hope that students will be familiar enough with the objects that they can focus on their execution of the sculpture process. Giving the students an

Figure 8. Kitchen Clay Tools from Inexpensive Alternatives Page

Clay Tools from the Kitchen

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