

studio-based clay courses



Student, Ursula Burgoyne, at Balmoral Pottery workshop, Footed Bowls, 2006

An alternative approach at Balmoral Pottery

In Australia at the moment someone wanting to learn to work with clay can choose from TAFE, university, evening and community colleges, crafts centres, some limited apprenticeships and pottery groups. These offer a variety of full-time and part-time options. Another currently expanding path is studio-based short courses, run by potters in working studios. In addition, some students, often from overseas, come to work and learn in studios for short periods under a mentorship arrangement.

In 2004, I built a teaching studio adjoining my own studio. The short course classes I have run so far have shown me the incredible potential of this approach for teaching and learning. The following article reflects on my experience and observations, and discussions I have had with peers who have done the same thing.

There seems to be a need for students with some experience, and who are enrolled or have been enrolled in formal courses, to gain additional and particular coaching. I see this as an adjunct to formal institution-based training.

Sometimes students want to get 'unstuck' when their work, or a particular aspect of their work, is not moving forward. Intense coaching in different ways to realise an idea or goal, as well as how to expand ideas and apply creativity, is suited to the studio short-course format.

Some students are searching for a sustainable independence of practice that maintains enthusiasm. In response, I have developed a method of teaching how to brainstorm ideas and problems and find creative



Rosemary Cole and Catherine Stuckings at Footed Bowls workshop

solutions. I use a questioning approach to help students discover the personal and meaning in their work, rather than trying to reach a required outcome. This is a key aspect of how I teach and encourage people to find their own way with clay. Each potter providing studio-based short courses will have an individual style and emphasis. My approach is one among many.

My experience when teaching small motivated groups is that the participants focus together. The atmosphere is animated and energetic. It seems to me that the students allow themselves more freedom for experimentation, play and inventiveness. The classes are usually small, so there is plenty of one-to-one assistance available.

Whilst the teaching is quite structured, the social interaction is markedly present and this facilitates the work as students encourage, support and assist each other. As a teacher I find this environment very enjoyable.

In the best tradition of adult education, these courses are focused around student needs and are free of educational bureaucracy. The curriculum is negotiated and students enthusiastically focus on what they want to learn. Whilst the dollar cost may be higher than in an institutional facility, students say to me that they have learned things they could

not have learned any other way and they have made unexpectedly rapid progress, and because of that the course has been value for money.

If a student has family and/or work commitments, these courses are often easier to fit in when juggling time pressures. Many of my students have full-time jobs and a weekend class for a few weeks is the best option for them.

As an adjunct to studio-based short courses, there is an international 'pottery trail' developing where independent young people wishing to gain hands-on work experience are travelling to 'teachers' in various countries. In my case, they contact me because they have been working with one of my wood-firing colleagues in another country. Once here, they seem to move on from pottery to pottery, gaining a unique range of experience. This is an interesting and affirming development. The usual format is for them to assist me in my studio with many unskilled or semi-skilled tasks and in exchange they receive food and board and the opportunity to make and learn with guidance and mentoring. Valuable firing experience is also often part of what the student learns. Added bonuses are the friendships that develop and the international network that results from continued contact. 

See next page for details on Sandy's next workshop at Balmoral Pottery