

'The trouble with clay is that you can't store it on a memory stick' A Consideration of Ceramics in Higher Education in Britain.¹

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This text was originally written as a dissertation which contributed to the author's BA Ceramics degree at Cardiff School of Art and Design in 2010. It has been amended and updated for publication at a time when the issues discussed seem even more urgent.

Introduction

A glance at the brimming year groups of ceramics students at Cardiff School of Art and Design paints a picturesque image of vitality, creativity and hope for the future of ceramics in Higher Education. However, a hop over the border to Harrow's ceramics department at the University of Westminster reveals a far bleaker picture. After a substantial refurbishment in 2007 the department is set to close in 2013 during its 50th anniversary year. With an international reputation for excellence and staff including Kyra Kane, Clare Twomey and Professors Christie Brown, Nigel Wood and Edmund de Waal, it is no surprise that the announced closure has sparked comments of disgust such as those from Jane Cairns, spokesperson for the Ceramics Student Action Committee: 'this is an appalling act of cultural vandalism – it is all about balance sheets, square footage and accountancy, not art. It is a betrayal and a disgrace.'²

To add to ceramics' already vulnerable state Camberwell School of Art saw its final ceramics students leaving in June 2011. Other departments have already seen the same end with Glasgow's and Edinburgh's courses closing their doors. Those who may have wished to study ceramics in Scotland now have no single discipline ceramics course to attend and must travel outside of Scotland to study specialist ceramics. The issue is of clear importance to the ceramics community with articles on the matter appearing numerous times in ceramics related journals. The January/February issue of *Ceramic Review* in 2009 addressed the impact of the Scottish course closures:

There needs to be a centre for ceramics in Scotland if the activity is to be sustained in any meaningful way that would provide a hub of activity, giving focus to makers and generating international networks.³

An article by the Crafts Council echoes these concerns over the unsettling state of craft in the UK and emphasises a particular concern over ceramics:

Ceramics has been the focus of particular concern since the University of Westminster closed its course and here the picture was less positive. Almost one in three of the 32 course closures were for ceramics courses (or courses which included a ceramics element), whilst only one in ten of the new courses were ceramics courses (or included a ceramics element).⁴

Ceramics in Higher Education is clearly facing dire times and this paper will discuss the potential for the future of ceramics to be assured. Numerous factors that may influence the current status and future of ceramics in Higher Education will be discussed such as internal politics within academic institutions and the space and cost consumed by ceramics students in comparison to those studying courses such as Graphics and Illustration. Government policy will also be discussed such as direct funding, apprenticeship schemes and provisions to include ceramic teaching within primary and secondary school education settings. Course structures themselves will also be considered by exploring multidisciplinary and specialist courses in Higher Education. Additionally, this paper will consider the perception of ceramics

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from those not directly involved in the medium as well as ceramics' current identity and how this may affect its perception and approach both within and outside of the academic setting.

Funding in Education

'The trouble with clay is that you can't store it on a memory stick':⁵ These were the words of a senior manager justifying the closure of the Harrow ceramics department. Education institutions appear to have a prejudice against ceramics courses due to the space and resources they consume. Commenting on the possible reasons for the closure of the Glasgow School of Art ceramics department, Ellie Herring states that; 'much of it centered on the value of the estate that Ceramic Design occupies.'⁶ It cannot be argued that kiln sites, throwing rooms and glaze rooms do not take up space and money. A ceramics department converted into perhaps two or three other departments with a far greater capacity for students paying the same university fees will certainly seem the more economically viable route for university managers under strict budgetary restraints. The current depressed economic climate may also negatively affect ceramics departments as well as university departments in general and may increase departments' vulnerabilities.

Schools

Within schools the situation becomes more complex. An article in *Ceramic Review* stated that: 'within Scotland there is a growing recognition of the need for expertise of creative practitioners in schools due to the shift in education to a thematic curriculum and a refocusing on the role of arts in education'.⁷ The article therefore suggests that the curriculum at least might recognize the need for creativity within schools; however it goes on to state that teachers in this field often lack the confidence to facilitate ceramic practice within the classroom.⁸ In Wales, although not focusing specifically on ceramics, there is also an emphasis on creativity at primary education level in the Foundation Phase curriculum⁹. The Foundation Phase highlights the opportunities children should have with a variety of materials, which clay clearly lends itself to, and might support the notion that ceramics education during compulsory education is not merely for the creation of future ceramists but is fundamentally important in the development of children and the facilitation of their engagement with the world around them. Writer Judith Burton also believes that children's engagement with different materials is of significant gain to their development:

The Western mind has for centuries dichotomized mind and body and found little use for imagination in the construction of human meaning, even in art. Intriguingly, where teachers do recognize the importance of embodied responses to materials, and where the environment supports the kind of thoughtful play and enquiry out of which visual ideas are born and meaning constructed, artistic learning can be kept alive. Where pedagogy intercedes to support development, one glimpses new and more complex kinds of interplay between body orientation and thinking. What we see by mid-to-late childhood in children's engagements with different materials is the interweaving of several new levels of competence.¹⁰

Burton suggests that clay offers children great potential for exploration and development and therefore its preservation throughout education should be maintained.

Yet moving into secondary education there is a serious concern for the arts in schools where the English Baccalaureate has essentially dismissed the value of art in favour of the subjects which the government believes children should study.¹¹ In combination with the lack of funding to maintain the costs of kilns and specialist equipment the situation becomes bleaker. To further highlight this difficult situation John Steers, chair of the NSEAD, recognizes the difficult state of ceramics in schools where there is a distinct emphasis on fine art and a neglect of craft, particularly in ceramics.

One criticism of art and design education, which I have made frequently, is that it has swung too far towards the fine art end of the spectrum in schools and, of course, that's quite the opposite of what's happened in higher education.¹²

Highlighting the disparity between schools, where there is a focus on fine art, and Higher Education where there are now far more students studying craft, it seems odd that specialisms such as ceramics are not offered greater support in secondary education. However, when looking more closely we see an upsurge in craft course popularity that is not towards ceramics but to courses such as textiles, joint honours degrees or multidisciplinary crafts courses.¹³ Appearing to support the practice of crafts in schools are comments by Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education) reported by Crafts Council from a key note talk for the Edge Foundation. During the speech, Gove was said to champion 'practical skills, including craft skills at school level and as routes to employment, particularly through apprenticeships'.¹⁴ Such comments on the surface appear promising for ceramics yet, as the Crafts Council report goes on to acknowledge, such comments may refer simply to manual skills and with no clear provision given for ceramics it is the more economically viable crafts which may triumph, thus supporting the multidisciplinary crafts approaches.

The picture becomes even bleaker when returning to Higher Education where the Browne report suggests that only strategically important languages and subjects where there are skills shortages should be awarded public funding for support.¹⁵ Taken alongside the increase in tuition fees and the current economic climate there may be individuals who are more cautious of making an investment in a degree which does not have obvious financial benefits.¹⁶ Such concern is acknowledged by the Crafts Council who feel that educating potential students about the viability of earning a reasonable income as a crafts graduate is a central aspect of ensuring future graduate numbers.¹⁷

Further strain is placed on ceramics practice in acknowledging that fewer students may experience clay and fewer graduates are coming from a ceramics background; understanding this in the context that a large number of arts graduates go into education it is clear then that a vicious circle develops whereby fewer ceramics graduates lead to fewer teachers passing on their passion for ceramics to the students.¹⁸ If ceramics student numbers dwindle, then this will only negatively affect a subject which is already vulnerable due to economic constraints.

The value of experiencing clay

I greatly valued the experiences in clay which I gained in school and fully believe that this contributed to my decision to study the subject at Higher Education. Since completing my studies at Cardiff I have gone on to complete a PGCE in Art and Design and there I felt the difficult educational situation to an even greater extent. Experiencing both a school where ceramics was highly valued and a school which had shut down its clay department I was able to see the reasoning behind both sides of the argument. Where ceramics had been taken over by graphics and photography there were brimming classes of students and where ceramics was a GCSE option there was only a handful of students. As a clay advocate I ran projects with students which enabled them to explore this medium and it was through doing this that a clear reason to include clay in the secondary curriculum became apparent. Students who had previously been disaffected in art and produced a low standard work in a 2D medium were able to work in 3D with ease and excelled in the medium. A large number of these students had learning difficulties such as dyslexia and the connection between 3D thinking and dyslexia is already established.¹⁹ With continuing focus on inclusion in schools this link may present an argument for the upkeep of ceramics in schools faced with budgetary constraints and may potentially support those all-important league tables through higher student achievement.

Adam Ross believes that the shortage of children's opportunities for experience with clay due to a lack of learning opportunities also contributes greatly to decreasing numbers of applicants for university courses. Ross, who was one of the last students of the Glasgow School of Art ceramics course, comments on the reasons for the decline in applicants onto the Glasgow ceramics course:

The reason given is because of the “steady decline in applicants” over the past few years. I believe this is not because the course is unpopular but because it is not taught and promoted within schools at GCSE and A-level grades.²⁰

Ross goes on to speak about a school in Newcastle upon Tyne which is making great efforts to accommodate the students' opportunities to work with clay. Glyn Thomas, head of the art department in the school, has established an endorsed GCSE in 3D design, and after achieving great success in terms of grades, the school has furthered this course to A-level. Much investment has been made into the ceramics facilities at this school and investment seems to be paying off with a number of students going on to study ceramics at degree level.

Enthusiastic specialists such as Glyn Thomas clearly do highlight the potential for ceramics to succeed in school yet the concerns over the economic viability of the material cannot be ignored. One avenue of exploration may look at specialists coming into schools to share their expertise with teachers as part of professional development or take the form of teaching students and processing the work outside of the school. This may alleviate some of the concerns over safety and costs and encourage students being taught by specialist makers; something which has been seen to improve classroom performance.²¹ The Crafts Council are supporting such an approach with their Firing Up program which aims to support an awareness of the importance of ceramics and help schools in running projects with their students.²² Similarly, research by the University of Cumbria into supporting niche craft subjects at school has demonstrated how student numbers can be increased through increased provisions in school and greater awareness of ceramics.²³

Another aspect of support may come from greater government funding. In China there have been 1200 new colleges created which specialize in art and craft with a specific focus on design.²⁴ Where, previously, designs might have come from British ceramics specialists with production taking place in China, China is now fully embracing the process. However, with the emphasis moving to graphics and illustration programs in school and Higher Education, one must question why governments and educators have not realized such a clear link between these disciplines and ceramics practice and responded with the support of a more sustainable future for production.

Andrew Livingstone, in an article in Ceramic Review on the 2008 ICMEA (International Ceramic Magazine Editors Association) conference in China, commented on how both the Chinese and Korean ceramics education systems were being influenced by their own students travelling to the West.²⁵ Robert Pulleyn reveals a similar strength in international ceramics education in commenting on the high attendance of young people at the NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conference stating that the high attendance of under twenty-fives resulted in 'an exhilarating conference....with old friends, new introductions, and young people hoping to meet their heroes'.²⁶ These positive links beg questions as to why the government is not setting aside greater funding to secure design links with countries such as China by investing in education, particularly at degree level. Perhaps the question may lie in the identity of ceramics itself. If the diverse potential of ceramics is not expressed then its potential may dwindle further. Now in a situation where graphic design is growing, the responsibility may lie with ceramics to move with the times and embrace the way in which the material can be exploited. This leads to more fundamental questions over ceramics' identity as a fine art, craft or design medium.

Ceramics?

Ellie Herring, in referring to external factors on ceramics course closures in Scotland, states that:

... there's the suggestion in the report that applicants are declining as a result of a 'general shift from the more traditional "craft-making" programs to ones which mainline the development of highly flexible creative thinkers who are able to apply a broader range of intellectual, analytical and making skills and link these particularly to the use of new technology'. Such language seems both tactless and revealing ...²⁷

In one respect, the statement is tactless as ceramics does create highly flexible creative thinkers with a great range of skills. However, Herring is writing from a ceramic informed background and, as such, has the knowledge of the current status of ceramics. It must be taken into account that the majority of people outside of the ceramics world have only a limited insight and many people associate ceramics most readily with studio pottery and mass produced domestic ware. When you tell a person that you are a ceramist they will usually respond with something about pottery and as Alison Britton states in her talk 'Overthrowing Tradition', 'throwing is the normal, commonly understood core of ceramic practice'²⁸ This preconception must at least be considered when examining interest in ceramics courses; particularly for school students who may be considering which art course may suit them.

With an alternative perspective it must be acknowledged that these associations may now be outdated for the many young people who experience very little, if any, ceramics on the wheel at school. For a younger generation the associations with clay may be far more centered on essential and domestic ware; an area of ceramics sitting comfortably in the design world. By illuminating these links with design, through areas such as graphics, a real strength may be harnessed for ceramics that complements the trend towards more graphic design in secondary school art education.

Then there is of course the opportunity for fine artists to use the medium and it can be argued that ceramics' status on the art and craft continuum is still contested. Some may see this as having a negative effect on its stability. However, a non hierarchical approach is where ceramics can best attract new practitioners. It is a material that holds enormous potential and a practitioner can define themselves however they wish as long as they set their work within an appropriate context. One may choose to be defined as a potter, artist, sculptor, designer, or maker; the list goes on, or equally one can choose to remain without definition. Jeffrey Jones, writing on studio pottery, comments on Garth Clark's metaphor of a relay race for the potter; in which the baton is passed from peasant potter, to artist potter, to studio potter. He states:

To go back to Garth Clark's metaphor of a relay race, I would argue that it is now unimaginable, at least in the foreseeable future, that we as a studio ceramics community will have either the inclination or opportunity to pass the baton on; there is no other kind of potter type on the horizon to whom the baton can conceivably be passed. Perhaps the metaphor itself is now obsolete, that kind of race is over, that kind of history making no longer holds good.²⁹

There is no new type of potter clearly on the horizon and the 'race' may now be a pointless metaphor but ceramics, particularly within the Higher Education setting, still offers the opportunity for diverse practice and it is this diverse nature which may prove its most supporting characteristic.

Garth Clark writes about Marek Cecula's opinions on ceramics' current status. In the article Clark states Cecula's belief that 'the ceramics movement currently finds itself in much the same place as other craft media. It can no longer claim ownership of its material'.³⁰ Those producing functional ware also face stiff competition from what Clark calls the 'unstoppable contemporary design juggernaut'³¹ and in referring to functional ware makers states that 'their markets are either becalmed or shrinking, while design grows exponentially'.³² The article continues:

Most ceramists view these developments as unfair and a threat to their future. Cecula sees it as their salvation. 'I welcome breaking craft's clay monopoly, and the democratization of ceramics is long overdue,' he argues. This means that ceramics can be advanced by anyone who is innovative and talented. That way ceramics becomes bigger and more viable. It loses its hermetic stamp. But it also means surviving in a tougher, thoroughly Darwinian playing field.³³

This analogy to a Darwinian playing field fits the future of ceramics neatly. Although specialist graduate numbers might decrease, the increased potential for using ceramics in different contexts and the possible competition for places onto courses due to decreasing course numbers is likely to mean a more competitive field all around.

With increased porosity between the fields of fine art, craft, design and technology comes more opportunity for innovation. It is now a crucial time for ceramics to define itself or emphasize its strengths in diversity, build on new technology and allow people to develop a specialism; many might develop an affinity to clay and a more porous approach to the material's potential should be more sustainable.

Such diversity supports people who hold affinity to technology and design and alternatively it can support people who value the crafted ware, reflective of human input rather than the anonymity of the mass produced. Jane Shellenbarger, writing about the vitality of functional ware in our culture explains that:

There is an urgent need for objects that not only accommodate the new challenges of our ever-changing and culturally diverse world, but can also nourish our connection to material culture and enrich us in new ways. There is an equally urgent need for makers and designers of such objects. A functional pot has a new set of requirements to fulfill if it is to remain vital in our culture.³⁴

The last point Shellenbarger makes is vital; makers and designers must produce objects that are innovative and suited to our times rather than objects which are merely nostalgic. Such works will only be regurgitation. Julian Stair echoes a similar point in his comments on two talks from prominent art critics Jed Pearl and Robert Hughes who spoke on their new found interest in ceramics. Stair was particularly critical of the suggestion in the talks of what he called a romanticisation of ceramics. The critics claimed disillusionment of the fine art world and found respite in ceramics; with both critics emphasizing the importance to ceramists of the materiality, tradition and the handmade in ceramic practice. Hughes claimed the fine art world to be corrupt, both financially, morally and aesthetically as well as being devoid of imagination. Stair criticized this view and stated that if both critics made more than fleeting inspection of ceramics they would find similar faults.³⁵ Ceramics must not be identified as a nostalgic practice but reap the rewards that can be harvested from today's economic climate with innovative work.

On examining literature on the future of ceramics it appears clear that the discipline is at a period of transition where identity and innovation must be made a priority in order to strengthen the great potential that the subject holds. The study of ceramics offers opportunity for practitioners to go into design, craft, fine art as well as research. In order to support such transition it is crucial to consider the composition of courses or the variety of courses made available to students. Should institutions offer general courses which incorporate opportunities to explore the fields of fine art or design; or should courses possess single identities such as remaining purely fine art orientated?

Specialism or multidisciplinary?

On initially reading articles on ceramics in Higher Education one can come away feeling pessimistic about the future. The number of academic institutions offering a specialist ceramics degree is dwindling: Harrow closing its doors in 2013; no specialist ceramics course in Scotland; and the Camberwell and Bath Spa BA courses ending student intake. So far, the current writing has considered external factors such as government input, compulsory education, and internal institutional politics and has also looked at ceramics current status in the creative world. Now the question of courses themselves shall be addressed. Some may be quick to defend courses and blame external factors. If, however, support for ceramic teaching in university is to be revived then internal questions must also be asked as to how the future for ceramics teaching can proceed.

Both design based and fine art based courses exist in the UK from Cardiff's leaning towards a fine art orientation to Central Saint Martins' ceramic design focus. One can question whether there should be this divide or whether courses should incorporate both sides of the spectrum. Yet both courses, although with somewhat different identities, still share some central values. Central Saint Martins' states:

In the 21st century, a good ceramic designer is now required to understand and appreciate the breadth of design territories, artistic and ceramic practice and challenge how those boundaries might be breached on an emotional, strategic, design responsible and commercial level.³⁶

Cardiff similarly demonstrates the potential of the medium:

Students have the opportunity to work across a broad range of processes, exploring the full potential of ceramic applications. Work from recent graduates has included: domestic tableware, fine art, figurative sculpture, installation, performance, film, animation, product design and surface pattern.³⁷

With similar values shared on specialist courses and a decrease in such courses in favour of multidisciplinary courses a more viable question may be whether such specialism is necessary.

The specialist ceramics course offers the student the potential truly to engage with their material; to learn its rich history and engage with the making process wholeheartedly, from clay body, process of construction, to glazing and other finishing techniques, as well as the variety of firings possible. An entire degree could be spent researching one glaze type. Clay can be approached in so many ways that it would appear clear that a specialist course is the only way to do the material justice and realise the potential that ceramists have. However, this specialisation can be argued to lead to a shying away from the possibilities offered by other materials and even an elitism compared to more multidisciplinary courses. Ceramists can be glued to their familiar material and in terms of departments within an art institution this can also lead to segregation. Cardiff School of Art and Design has a thriving course yet more dialogue between departments might improve porosity and sharing of ideas and approaches.

In attending the *MA'ness* conference held at the Royal College of Art in London in 2009, I was fortunate to hear the talks from Christian Gonzenbach, tutor from the University of Geneva and Kari Skoe Fredrikson, professor of ceramics in the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. Felicity Aylieff from the Royal College of Art, asked Skoe Fredrikson her opinion on a more interdisciplinary approach to ceramics, which seemed to be the theme of the day.³⁸ Coming from a department where there is specialisation in clay, yet an interdisciplinary approach is encouraged, she responded that the entire art department has a policy of open staffing whereby students can speak with staff members from various disciplines. The ceramics department also shares its space with another applied arts course, photography, and is also situated next to the fine art department. Fredrikson went on to explain that this approach leads to greater porosity in the studio and therefore greater dialogue between disciplines.

A similar approach is taken at Geneva University and the tutor attending the conference, Christian Gonzenbach, stated that the main aim of the department is to produce students who will make, and continue to make, consistent work that is true to themselves rather than 'sexy' work which will sell in galleries at the time. He echoed the importance of dialogue between disciplines and an openness to use other materials stating that the material itself is not important as long as the process is correct.

This notion of process seems key in the perception of what makes a good student. Professor Alan Cummings of the Royal College of Art, who introduced the *MA'ness* forum spoke about assessment of the MA course in Ceramics and Glass and stated that process is one of the key points in assessment. Students of a good level were expected to make the best use of materials according to their ambitions in order to realise potentials.

The speakers from Geneva and Bergen noted that the dialogue between disciplines is echoed in the perception of ceramics outside of the educational setting, where it is well regarded in the fine art world. There is considerable blurring of boundaries. It seems appropriate then to suggest that this is where the future of ceramics best lies. The discussion of multidisciplinary vs. specialist courses may be resolved by emphasizing that a student's greatest success is best manifested in the realization of their own ambitions and what processes are appropriate to those ideas.

There seems a general consensus that ceramics is a discipline of ever-widening possibilities and that those of innovative thought can excel in the medium. Perhaps the best courses are those which offer specialisation in their material but encourage porosity between other disciplines if this is appropriate to the students' ambitions. A balance is therefore gained between in depth historical knowledge and an intimate understanding of the material and the potential to reap the rewards that other materials may offer. This approach may lead to the most innovative and sophisticated outcomes from new ceramists.

Yet in support of multidisciplinary courses, the exploration of numerous materials may create more open minded practitioners willing to push boundaries and with Masters courses such as that of Cardiff available to graduates it may be a positive aspect of a practitioner's development to explore first and specialize later on; particularly if little experience has been gained prior to Higher Education. Additionally the level of study adopted at MA may further increase the quality of ceramics practitioners due to the increased level of critical engagement required.

So where does this leave the ceramics student in Higher Education or the potential student in secondary school with regards to their learning? Shellenbarger, speaking from an academic teaching position, believes that knowledge of the diversity of ceramics is crucial. She states that the best and only doctrine to follow in ceramics education is to be 'informed about historical and industrial practices' and to use innovation and intuition'.³⁹ Shellenbarger feels that students are where the potential lies and that they are the 'innovators, thinkers, and makers who will take the field into the future'.⁴⁰ Echoing a similar thought, in a *Ceramic Review* article on the *Idea & Act* symposium held at Bath Spa University in 2008, Conor Wilson comments that Keith Harrison, speaking from the audience, repeats what most believe, that 'the strength of ceramics lies in its rich history and the great diversity of contemporary practice'. Wilson goes on to state that if knowledge of ceramics is not to be lost then specialist centers must be preserved.⁴¹

If specialist centers are preserved, the future seems to bode well but unfortunately at present this is simply not a realistic scenario. Perhaps a few successful centres will remain and instead more students will experience multidisciplinary courses. For those who are innovative, creative and willing to learn the in-depth knowledge of the practice, the field of ceramics appears to offer great potential and possibility. Yet unfortunately many students may have to work with only one or two specialists on a multidisciplinary course or continue studies to Masters level. For others it must be considered that apprenticeships may be a more viable alternative with schemes such as Adopt-a-Potter, yet still these tend to require a degree of experience prior to starting the apprenticeship.

From the diversity of ceramics itself it may be a diversity in approaches to the study of ceramics that is needed to carry a future forward. For the numerous aspects of ceramic's potential there may be various ways to learn about the medium that may be fitting to the individual's ambitions yet what is necessary to achieve this is the right dialogue between departments, the appropriate experience and guidance delivered prior to Higher Education, and the open-mindedness of individuals to break the mould and engage with the exciting possibilities that ceramics in the future may hold.

Other possibilities are not only centered on ceramics, but have great potential beyond education in areas other than ceramic making. Skills such as team playing, problem solving and organisation are all gained from a degree in ceramics and these skills equip people for many careers outside the circle of ceramics. Conor Wilson, in a review of Richard Jacobs' *Searching for Beauty*, comments that:

I wholeheartedly recommend that young people go into ceramics, just as long as they are realistic and engaged. There are many skills to be learned that will equip a person for life – organisation, discipline, time-management, problem-solving, creative thinking, not to mention the particular skills of making by hand. There are even good careers to be had, as long as you are flexible and resourceful. Despite various problems that we face, both within ceramics and at a wider socio-economic level, this is an exciting time to be involved with the arts. Craft skills and creativity are part of the solution, not the problem. Boundaries are blurring and dull hierarchies are all but collapsed.⁴²

This statement not only marks the potential for graduates to succeed in the art world but also highlights the qualities that are gained from a degree in ceramics. Tanya Harrod, in her article for *Crafts* entitled 'A Crisis in the Making', which comments on the closure of Harrow, mentions a past student, Carys Davies', opinions of the Harrow course, which echo some of Wilson's points: 'studying ceramics at Westminster “challenged students from all backgrounds and abilities” and developed “stamina, persistence, and an emphatic understanding of the need to test overoptimistic assumptions” ’, she goes on to say that 'Davies concludes that this kind of “deep, principled learning” provides an ideal preparation not just for life as a ceramist but for a whole range of occupations'.⁴³

Conclusions

Ceramics is currently at a stage where its ambiguous identity is both its greatest strength and weakness. Practitioners, both new and established, are producing a remarkable range of diverse and innovative work and departments around the UK are continuing to produce quality graduates. However, the hostility that departments are facing due to economic constraints and strict budgets must not be ignored. Ceramics departments do require considerable investment and therefore need the support of their institutions. The support is necessary in order to allow students to explore ceramics in the depth that it deserves. The importance of children's experience with clay during compulsory education is also crucial. Schools must be supported and encouraged to include ceramics on the curriculum. Experience with clay not only leads to generating an interest of the material with young people but also benefits creative development and understanding. A holistic approach to provision in ceramics education is likely to prove most fruitful. For this, consider a clay cylinder on the potter's wheel as a useful analogy. To throw a cylinder there must be a balance of forces acting upon the clay, otherwise the clay will be thrown off centre and the cylinder ruined. These forces can be imagined as education within compulsory education, government support, the perception of ceramics, and how the subject is taught in Higher Education. Each of these factors must be acting equally in order to produce an even force in the successful production of quality ceramists who will continue ceramic study into the future whether they become makers, teachers, researchers and so on. If one of these factors is out of balance then the success of ceramics in Higher Education becomes precarious.

Paying particular attention to the perception of ceramics is integral. Those not already attuned to the medium must be educated about its diverse nature. Specialist departments with an attitude to embrace porosity are likely to hold the most promise in defining ceramics as a diverse and innovative discipline. With this approach, a wonderful balance can be achieved between an intimate knowledge of the material and an openness to other materials' potential.

The battle for specialist departments may be failing and perhaps only a few centers will remain. Yet the diversity of practice may support diversity in routes for ceramics education. Undergraduate courses are not simply about acquiring a specialist skill but can also equip graduates with flexibility of thinking, critical awareness, persistence and strong work ethic. With no new type of potter on the horizon educators may be in the best position to support students in developing their own directions and going beyond boundaries. Harnessing this

within education can perhaps support ceramics in going beyond a very difficult time to one where the medium gains new strengths and a more promising future.

Notes

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- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 'Ceramics in Scotland' report. *Ceramic Review*, no. 235, January/February 2009, pp.28-33, p.30-31.
- 4 Crafts Council, 'Craft & Higher Education: An Update', 2011, <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/about-us/press-room/view/2011/craft-higher-education-an-update?from=/about-us/press-room/list/2011/> (date accessed, 19/10/12).
- 5 Cairns in 'Save Harrow Ceramics'.
- 6 Ellie Herring, 'RIP: Ceramic Design Education in Scotland', *Crafts*, no. 212, May/June 2008, p.14.
- 7 'Ceramics in Scotland', p.30.
- 8 *Ibid.*
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- 11 Jessica Shepherd, 'School Budget Cuts: Careers Advice, Music and Art among the First Casualties', *The Guardian*, 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/dec/26/school-budget-cuts-careeradvice-music-art> (date accessed 15/10/12).
- 12 'Interview: Sir Chris Frayling, Patron of NSEAD, is interviewed by John Steers', *The National Society for Education in Art and Design Magazine*, Spring 2011, Issue 1, http://www.nsead.org/downloads/AD_no_1.pdf (date accessed 15/10/12).
- 13 Crafts Council. 'Craft & Higher Education: An Update'.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Lord Browne of Madingley, 'Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education. An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance', 2010. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf> (date accessed 19/10/12).
- 16 Will Hunt, Linda Ball & Emma Pollard, 'Crafting Futures: A Study of the Early Careers of Craft Graduates from UK Higher Education Institutions', Institute for Employment Studies/University of the Arts, London/Crafts Council, 2010, http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/files/file/cd68904f6f59df22/crafting_futures_full_report.pdf (date accessed 17/10/12).
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