



Is it just a lump of clay?

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Any school which has set out to bring about learning in an interesting atmosphere could bring in a dedicated area for working with hands. A craft studio or center could provide a rich resource in exploring various materials and could be introduced for children from an early age.

Natural materials like clay, bamboo, wood, coconut shells, seeds pods and other fascinating materials like paper, thread, cloth and beads could be brought in for the mere joy of understanding the nature and differing qualities of these materials.

A craft studio can easily embark on using clay as one of its main mediums to bring out the imaginations and ideas of children. This is a very flexible material, which allows anybody to build, construct, design, mold, roll, readjust, reuse and break completely to start all over again without much of a problem. This area needs a fairly inexpensive investment, with least requirement of tools and equipment.

Let us slightly step back from the above to briefly look at what constitutes a vibrant, robust and open learning environment? This is crucial as learning is generally seen as just acquiring and assimilation of skills and knowledge. We have to perhaps stretch this limited use to look at other significant qualities like having the space to doubt and question, being aware of our relationships, seeing if one resorts to fear, not conforming to rigid systems while working, not using force and misplaced sense of discipline, comparison etc.



It is a worthwhile exercise to discuss how when all these aspects are combined, an enriching experience can be created, in a craft and clay studio. We could take the essential aspects to see how they could be translated into a classroom situation for a teacher to enable such challenges to happen.

Initiative to work with responsibility

A space for working with the hands draws enormous motivation to work independently or in a group, to engage with ideas and expressions with minimal support from the teacher. The teacher's role is more to make sure that they are serious, responsive to their work, with a sense of quiet and yet actively bring out their energies. This is often interspersed with sharing of thoughts

and feedback, which is essential to the process of generating ideas and techniques.

Use of discussion and dialogue for sharing and sorting out issues

The teacher has the possibility to integrate any questions pertaining to behaviour, relationships and sharing of each others' discoveries either about the work or about one's thinking, in the class in a sensitive fashion without necessarily placing these two in any order of importance.

If one is serious of not using the fabric of fear to fix issues and problems, then dialogue could have a valuable role in communicating with one another.

One could start a class or during the class talk of anything related to, that is bothering or preventing an easy flow for effective learning to manifest.

Climate of our relationships

A clay studio invariably has scope for exchange of ideas and responses of various kinds as one gets to be critical or appreciate each other's talent or capacity. The adult or teacher could use this opportunity to see how these could be done with a feeling of affection, not use any kind of comparison and favouritism or rejection, which defeats the very purpose of an open and unbiased environment.

The teacher needs to be conscious of the many emotional moments of the children, and to see how they display or dictate their state of mind while working. This often gets ignored if the teacher is preoccupied in enforcing her own demands in teaching the subject matter.

It is also an occasion to watch the dynamics displayed between the students themselves, which left on their own could make them totally preoccupied with their excitement of being together. Constant control mechanisms may not go very far in expressing the concern. How does the teacher bring in a sense of quiet and rigour in their engagement without constantly policing and reminding? This is an ongoing challenge for the teacher. It is innovative for the teacher in weaving

in dialogue by involving the children to become aware of this pattern.

Evaluation and feedback

In the area of art and craft, very often one gives an immediate feedback such as: nice, not nice, good, very good or beautiful, looks exactly, marvelous, wow and so on. What does it mean to share a response, which could be factual or objective without suggesting any degree of superlatives or negatives and yet present a critical appreciation? This is a difficult aspect but cannot be ignored, as children get affected easily to such ways of evaluation, which perhaps may limit their overall creative instinct and capacity.

How does the teacher judge any work and place value on the work done by the children? This is a debate and dilemma no ready made answers. What is evident is there is something misplaced in the way adults go about looking at work and tend to evaluate in very convenient, shallow ways in order to quickly arrive at a way of marking their proficiency.

One very simple way of addressing this at this point is by giving a generous space for displaying all work done for everyone to see. Each child could share his/her thoughts and intention after making an artifact or an object. This largely takes care of not placing any order of superiority among their pieces of art.

Process overriding the result

Any healthy learning environment depends upon giving most of the importance to the process of working throughout rather than worrying about the final outcome. Resistance to try, to experiment, to take risks and to pay attention to what is at hand, may not put one to test in the process of working.

The teacher could be a catalyst in bringing to the childrens' notice and help them find out what is preventing them from getting started with their work and where the hurdles lay.

When a student finds a clay piece which he had worked on with a sense of diligence and care