

CONVERSATIONS IN CLAY
REFLECTIONS ON DIALOGUE IN THE CERAMICS STUDIO

by

Jack McDermott

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Accepted:



Natalia Kormeluk, M.F.A.
Committee Member



Desmond Beach, M.F.A.
Committee Member



Joyce Michaud, M.F.A.
Thesis Advisor

Chaz Martinsen, M.F.A.
Interim Director of the
Graduate Ceramic Arts Program

April Boulton, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	1
AUTHORIZATION	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	3
LIST OF FIGURES.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
THESIS STATEMENT	7
INTRODUCTION	8
DEFINITION OF TERMS	10
<i>DIALOGUE.....</i>	10
<i>SPACE AND PERSPECTIVE.....</i>	15
REFLECTIONS ON DIALOGUE	18
<i>AS A STUDENT</i>	18
<i>AS A TEACHER</i>	22
<i>AS AN ARTIST.....</i>	24
DISCUSSION AND RESULTS	27
<i>PROCESS AND BODY OF WORK OVERVIEW.....</i>	27
<i>EXHIBITION INSTALLATION AND FINAL BODY OF WORK.....</i>	39
CONCLUSION.....	57
ADDENDUM.....	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY	64

LIST OF FIGURES

Photos were taken by Jack McDermott unless otherwise indicated.

Figure	Page
1. Center wall view from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, <i>Flexible Learning</i>12 Hodson Gallery, Hood College, Frederick, MD.	12
2. Left side wall view from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, <i>Flexible Learning</i>12 Hodson Gallery, Hood College, Frederick, MD.	12
3. Image of pieces from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, <i>Flexible Learning</i>13	13
4. Artist standing with his Advanced Placement (AP) Portfolio18 The Field School, Washington, DC, May 2008.	18
5. View of the ceramics studio at The Field School, Washington, DC, May 201320	20
6. View of the ceramics studio at Hood College, Frederick, MD, 201821	21
7. View of the central table at the 2019 Montgomery Potters Fall Sale25 Garrett Park Town Hall, Garrett Park, MD, November 2019.	25
8. Cracked, horizontal clay lines show leather hard wild clay dug by my student28	28
9. Freshly painted slab surface29	29
10. Freshly painted slab surface29	29
11. Freshly painted slab surface29	29
12. Freshly painted slab surface29	29
13. Two painted slabs on plastic and plasterboard ready to dry overnight30	30
14. Painted slab after it has undergone stretching31	31
15. Large slab sculptures before alterations are made to create direct/indirect dialogue33	33
16. Large slab sculptures after alterations are made to create direct/indirect dialogue33	33
17. Template used to cut initial slabs for small, slab-built sculptures35	35
18. Small, slab-built sculptures cut from same template in leather hard stage, post alterations36	36

19. View of kiln stack from May 2019 firing	37
20. View of kiln stack from February 2020 firing	37
21. View of kiln stack from March 2020 firing	38
22. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	41
23. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	42
24. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	43
25. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	44
26. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	45
27. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	46
28. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	47
29. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	48
30. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	48
31. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	49
32. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	50
33. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	51
34. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	52
35. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	53
36. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	54
37. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	55
38. <i>Conversations in Clay</i> Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.....	56

ABSTRACT

The dialogue shared between the artist and the clay is an important component of the ceramics process; however, exploration and growth often become static without engaging in dialogue with other members of a community. This research uses slab-built, ceramic sculptures with expressive surfaces and a focus on occupying and sharing space to visually examine the concept of dialogue and investigate how that visual definition of dialogue relates to the interactions and experiences observed in the ceramics studio environment. The dialogue the artist shares with the clay mirrors and is enhanced by the dialogue shared within the ceramic studio community. This research evaluates the value of community in the ceramics studio and identifies what makes the ceramics studio so conducive to fostering a community atmosphere.

THESIS STATEMENT

Illustrated through the artist's personal experiences, the dialogue shared between the artist and the clay is an important component of the ceramics process; the artist's exploration and growth are greatly enhanced by also engaging in dialogue with other members of a community. This research uses slab-built, ceramic sculptures with expressive surfaces occupying and sharing physical space to visually demonstrate the concept of dialogue and correlate how that visual definition of dialogue relates to the interactions and experiences observed in the ceramics studio environment.

INTRODUCTION

As a ceramics teacher, building community in the classroom is an essential element of my work. I want my students to be able to learn in a safe environment that fosters curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking, all in a space that encourages them to share their individuality and stories through their artwork. My desire to understand how to create a better classroom community, specifically as it pertains to ceramics, was the primary inspiration for this research.

Looking back at the communities that have contributed the most to my growth and learning over the years, I am always directed back to the ceramics studio. The various ceramics studios that I have worked in and the interactions I have had in each of them have played a major role in my development as an individual, an artist, and as a teacher. The importance of dialogue and conversation in both my teaching pedagogy and my art-making process is a direct result of the experiences and dialogue that I was exposed to in these ceramics communities over the years.

The research for *Conversations in Clay* was first started in 2018 for my certificate exhibition, *Flexible Learning*. Based on observations made during that exhibition and the concepts of community and learning theory put forth by Etienne Wenger in his book, *Communities of Practice*, my thesis presents working definitions for both *dialogue* and *space* and their relationship to the concept of *perspective*. Then, through direct observation and close examination of the physical environments and the on-going dialogue in three different ceramic communities, along with my personal experiences in those communities, I reflect on the impact and the role dialogue has contributed to my growth and development as an individual and artist. I also draw connections between the necessary dialogue that I have engaged in within these communities and the dialogue that I observe and create within my clay work during the

construction and firing processes. Consequently, the research for *Conversations in Clay* has resulted in three arrangements of slab-built sculptures that visually explore and experiment with the concept of dialogue by using expressive surfaces and a focus on occupied and shared space. The work examines how the visual definition of dialogue correlates to the interactions experienced in the ceramics studio environment.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Dialogue

Dialogue is essential to my success as both an educator and an artist. As a teacher, I approach the classroom prepared with lesson plans and projects, but my students require flexibility for variables I may not always account for. Working with students forces me to adjust my plans to fit their behavior, decisions, and moods each day, often allowing me to create a much more engaging learning environment than I had originally envisioned. I view my teaching as an evolving dialogue between the elements of the teacher and student that requires adaptability and change.

My work as a ceramic artist closely correlates to this experience, as I am constantly in dialogue with the clay material each time I sit down to make work. I approach the studio with a definitive plan, but the construction process sparks new ideas and directions that I may not initially consider, based on how the clay and materials react to my touch. As much control as I exert over my work, I have learned to lean into the clay's natural tendencies and provide it an opportunity to add its voice to the conversation. Working with soft, thin slabs, I purposefully exaggerate the fluid movement of the clay by stretching and altering the form and surface to add more spontaneity to my typically rigid and precise choices. The process of making requires me to assess and modify my decisions at each stage. The unexpected moments and adaptations that result from my flexible interactions with the clay produce work that is unplanned and beautiful and would not have otherwise happened given my best-laid plans.

The common theme in these two areas regarding dialogue is that there are clear elements of adaptation, change, and individual growth. Dialogue in its fundamental form is an interaction

between two or more elements in space. Critical to this, however, is that dialogue is never static.

It is something that is constantly evolving and changing because of the nature of what an interaction is, which as of August 10th, 2020, Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines as a "reciprocal action or influence." In *Design Language*, Tim McCreight states, "in genuine dialogue there must be a period of assimilation as information is received and considered."¹

Dialogue is a direct result of its immediate circumstances and how the elements engaged in the dialogue receive and present information; thus, there is a factor of improvisation and spontaneity that is inherent to dialogue. Yet, as a result of the dialogue and exchange of ideas, those circumstances are reshaped and altered. Dialogue ultimately contributes to the individual growth of whatever elements are engaged, or were engaged, in that dialogue.

In my 2018 certificate exhibition, *Flexible Learning* (Figure 1., Figure 2.), I connected my process of working with clay to my pedagogy of teaching and my experiences interacting with students. Using surface, form, and process, I explored and expressed the evolving dialogue that I observed happening in both the classroom and the ceramics studio. While it was not initially my intention, during the installation of this exhibition it became evident that there was a strong component of unplanned dialogue that was created in the space between different groupings of sculptures. While thematically, my work focused on the dialogical relationship of student and teacher expressed through individual pieces, a second dialogue occurred physically between how the forms and their placement in the exhibition visually interacted. Color and lines were highlighted or toned down based on where they were set in relation to other pieces. The stretched and pressed contours of one form, intended to illustrate the history of the dialogue between the artist and clay, created dynamic negative spaces when placed in close proximity

¹ Tim McCreight, *Design Language* (Brunswick, Maine: Byrnmorgen Press, 2006), 35-36.

with other work. It was observed that the space created between groupings of pieces accentuated each individual form in new and interesting ways, allowing for groupings to be more compositionally powerful than the individual pieces were on their own.



Figure 1. Center wall view from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, *Flexible Learning*. Hodson Gallery, Hood College, Frederick, MD.



Figure 2. Left side wall view from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, *Flexible Learning*. Hodson Gallery, Hood College, Frederick, MD.

This can be observed in Figure 1. and Figure 3., where the two similar forms engage in a visual dialogue that strengthens both forms and highlights their similarities and differences. Seen primarily in Figure 1. on the previous page, the undulations of the form of the smaller piece on the right help to highlight and bring out the horizontal lines of the taller piece on the left. When the taller piece was viewed on its own, the strong, vertical black line moving up the right side dominated the composition; together, the comparison and parallel between the horizontal lines of the one piece and the horizontal lines created by the stretched form on the other piece visually play off each other to enhance the composition. Similarly, seen primarily in Figure 3., the darker tint and lack of blue in the piece on the right helps to highlight and draw attention to the small, normally subtle, blue dots in the top third region of the taller piece. Finally, illustrated well in both Figure 1. and Figure 2., the undulations of both forms create interesting and dynamic negative spaces between the two pieces that change and alter based on the viewer's perspective.



Figure 3. Image of pieces from the artist's 2018 certificate exhibition, *Flexible Learning*.

While I observed the conversations between pieces clearly for the first time, this concept is not something new; when performing a composition analysis on a ceramic form, one element that is important to consider is the aura, or unseen space around the work². The visual space an individual piece inhabits, and controls, is often much larger than the physical boundaries of the form. During the installation of *Flexible Learning*, it was clearly exhibited that when these auras came in contact, due to the amount of space left between each form, there was a visual interaction that occurred. Through this process, it became evident that the concept of space is a key component in the creation of visual dialogue³. Dialogue cannot occur without a shared common space. Space determines the extent to which different subjects interact and the kind of dialogue those different subjects engage in.

² Joyce Michaud, "East Asian Coil" (lecture, Hood College, Frederick, MD, May 21, 2016)

³ One of the Greek roots of the word dialogue is "dia," meaning "between." The space between two pieces or elements is an important factor in creating dialogue. From McCreight, *Design Language*, 35-36.

Space and Perspective

Physical space is a critical component of the community and classroom ceramics studios. Elements such as storage space, table space, and wheel availability all consistently need to be evaluated to allow the studio to function efficiently and correctly. As new work is produced, there is a constant need to clear up space on the various firing shelves (green-ware, bisque, glaze-ware) and move work through the kilns and stages of the process. During each firing, especially atmospheric firings, ceramic artists must consider the space available in their kilns and place pieces accordingly to maximize both the aesthetic quality of the firing and the efficiency and productivity of the firing, allowing for as much work as possible to fit in the kiln and not stall the process of creating new work.

In the ceramics studio, the most difficult use of space to control is how the artists, students, or community members move through that space. Each person inhabits space differently, and thus are constantly in dialogue with one another as they bump into each other, move around, and interact.

In his book *Communities of Practice*, Etienne Wenger puts forth the concept of a *community of practice*, which can be simply described as a “community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise.”⁴ In these communities, there is a great deal of shared learning that occurs as a result of this shared pursuit. As part of his explanation for this theory, Wenger states the importance of perspective in a community, as new perspectives can “reveal progress that had remained unnoticed.”⁵ Here, Wenger is specifically speaking about the addition

⁴ Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45.

⁵ Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 90.

of new people into a *community of practice* and how that affects the other current community members. He states, “when newcomers join a community of practice...relations shift in a cascading process. Relative newcomers become relative old-timers. Last year’s trainee now helps the new trainee.”⁶ These changes often go unrecognized but end up creating new perspectives that drastically affect the members of the community: “participants forge new identities from their new perspectives. These changes...can reveal progress that had remained unnoticed: you suddenly see all that you have learned because you are in a position to help someone.”⁷

While Wenger is focusing on the sustainability and generational history of a *community of practice*, the important takeaway from this element of his learning theory is the concept of perspective and its effects on learning and growth. Wenger writes that “a perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you just what to do. Rather, it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to, what difficulties to expect, and how to approach problems.”⁸ When individuals gain different perspectives, they are able to learn and to grow because those new perspectives help guide them to notice and pay attention to ideas, solutions, and progress that they might not normally notice.

Sharing and expanding perspectives naturally occurs in the ceramics studio when individuals inhabit the space and interact with each other in the space through dialogue. Each person in the studio has a unique perspective in terms of what they bring to the space as an artist and what they observe and see other makers in the space doing. Where someone is physically located in the space provides that person with a perspective that affects how they interact with

⁶ Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 90.

⁷ Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 90.

⁸ Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 9.

and engage in dialogue with the people around them. That dialogue creates and encourages opportunities for growth.

To demonstrate how physical space in the ceramics studio encourages and creates growth through dialogue, I will be examining three different experiences and perspectives that I have had over the years as part of the ceramics community. While I have been part of many studio environments, I am choosing to focus on the two ceramics studio environments that are currently my primary sources of dialogue: my perspective as a ceramics student and my perspective as a ceramics teacher. I will also be briefly reflecting on another ceramics community experience that is not grounded in the physical space of a ceramics studio but does involve the gathering of many ceramic artists: the fall pottery sales I take part in as a member of a group called Montgomery Potters. I drew from these observations and perspectives to create the work in the thesis exhibition, *Conversations in Clay*.

REFLECTIONS ON DIALOGUE

As a Student

My initial experience with ceramics started in middle school at The Field School in Washington, DC (Figure 4.). There were many components of working with clay that I immediately was drawn to, from having the ability to make something that was tangible and useful to the excitement and power that came with being able to manipulate wet clay on a spinning wheel; however, the primary aspect of the class that drew me in was how different it was than all of my other classes.



Figure 4. Artist standing with his AP Portfolio at The Field School, Washington, DC, May 2008.

I enjoyed most subjects in school, yet in terms of how each class was structured, my experience and interaction with the classroom space were always the same. Students would come into class, take a seat at individual desks, listen to the teacher, and ultimately express their knowledge through tests, quizzes, or discussions, usually still seated. As much as my teachers succeeded in making classes interesting, engaging, and full of learning, the way in which space was occupied was always very static. These classes were also often based around discussion or participation, and to demonstrate your understanding, you were required to speak up or say something. As a shy student who at the time was overly concerned with how others perceived me, this was very difficult and stressful.

Ceramics classes were different. These classes were based around the creation of three-dimensional forms, and from the very start of the class, my knowledge and skills were assessed by the success of the products I was able to create. Yes, in other classes I was graded and assessed on products (essays, problem sets, etc.), but the products in ceramics were much more visible to the entire class. This allowed my artwork to speak for me when and if my words and my confidence during discussions could not.

The studio was set up to accommodate both hand-building and throwing, with a large central table (Figure 5.) and a separate small, oval grouping of wheels that were placed around four plugs in the floor. Unlike the other classes where all students had their own space (individual desks) and brought their own tools (pencils, paper, binders), everything in the room was communal and shared by all. This immediately created a change in experience when students arrived in the studio, as they had to navigate how to share and interact with their classmates in this communal space.



Figure 5. View of the ceramics studio at The Field School, Washington, DC, May 2013.

As students worked independently on their projects, either gathered around the large table or sitting around the wheels, there was always a tendency to fill the silence and space with conversation. However, there was no pressure to engage in that conversation if you did not want to. Unlike other classes, I did not have to speak to engage in the dialogue but could simply listen if that is all I wanted to do. I was accepted and included in the group because people could see the quality of work that I was making and the effort that was put into that work. The space provided a low-stress environment where I could speak up or add my voice when I wanted to, which over time encouraged me to do so frequently.

Even now as a graduate student at Hood, and whose job as a teacher is to stand up in front of a class every day and fill the space with words, questions, and explanations, I have found myself sitting back and listening during classes. I find myself watching what other graduate students are creating and examining how they are working with and manipulating the clay

material as we sit around a similar, but larger, grouping of wheels (Figure 6.). I do engage in a fair amount of verbal dialogue during my graduate classes, but as was the case in middle school, it is done on my own terms and not as a result of an assessment. The ceramics studio has always created an environment where dialogue feels natural, safe, and ultimately empowering.



Figure 6. View of the ceramics studio at Hood College, Frederick, MD, 2018.

As a Teacher

As a teacher, my interactions and dialogue in the ceramics studio are clearly visible to the outside viewer, as I am constantly engaging in some sort of conversation with my students. Through critiques, presentations, demonstrations, hands-on help with a specific process, or simply chatting about weekend plans or my dog, my role as a teacher necessitates dialogue.

However, where I really notice dialogue in the classroom is through observing how my students interact with and create with the clay. Teaching the same lesson and technique to 12-13 individual students always yields multiple different approaches. Students receive the same information in the same way, yet based on their perspective and processing, those students all might understand that information in drastically different ways. This creates a community environment where students learn and observe from other students in the room, rather than just relying on information from the teacher. Sitting around the large central hand-building table, students are constantly observing each other's moves and ways of working, inspiring them to try new methods and approach the material in new ways.

As the teacher, I am also constantly inspired and energized by my students' approaches to the material. I have access to a constant influx of ideas as a result of my students and their perspectives; they give me insight into what it means to be discovering clay and different clay processes for the first time. My work currently focuses on the use of soft slabs; I have my own understanding of how to use slabs and what to do with them, but this understanding is based on my experiences and my methods that have been developed and set over time. When my students learn to roll out slabs and build with them for the first time, their process of learning allows me to step out of my own perspective and see the clay and technique in ways that I may have never considered before.

Another area of dialogue that I notice in the classroom is my physical location in relation to my students. As the teacher, where I am standing at any given time is typically considered the “front of the room,” making any student who is far away from me seated in the “back of the room.” While I often start class each day at the same spot at the large hand-building table, I choose to actively change my location throughout the class by walking around the table and sitting down in different places. By doing this, I can alter the proximity and relationship to which I am engaging with my students. The closer I am to a student during class might create more pressure to stay focused and engaged; on the other hand, those students may feel more valued and recognized for their work because I am actively coming to sit and interact with them. My continual movement through the space makes it so there is no longer a front of the table, and my influence on the students and their influence on me constantly changes based on the proximity and relationship between where we are located in the space.

Ultimately, I view my teaching role as being not just someone who relays knowledge but also as someone who can model the learning process. On days when students are working and do not need much help, I will often create work in conjunction, allowing students to watch my process and make observations about how I manipulate the clay in a more informal manner that is separate from the normal direct instruction or demonstrations. I also make time for moments where I can be transparent and honest about what I am learning and discovering each day, and vulnerable about moments when I am struggling or not understanding questions. While I am the teacher, all members of the class bring equal experiences and perspectives to the table each day.

As an Artist

As an artist, I have chosen to be part of a community pottery group called Montgomery Potters. It is a group of ceramic artists and craftspeople that meet once a month for workshops, meetings, and artist lectures. They also work together to hold 2-3 pottery sales throughout the year. However, due to my teaching schedule, I choose to only participate in the fall sale.

While I see the members of this group often throughout the year at meetings, the fall sale is the one time each year that I get to closely examine and interact with their ceramic work and they get to see the work that I have been making. The sale provides an opportunity to participate in specific dialogue with these artists about our work and also receive feedback from other non-artist community members that come to the sale.

The ceramic work in this sale is not grouped by artist, but is instead grouped by color on large tables, with the main room always including a huge central table filled with work (Figure 7.). Pieces from different artists with different styles all mix and mingle together, creating interesting visual dialogues that often spark new ideas. Every year I have been a part of this sale, I have noted either myself or another artist commenting on some aspect of the work that they never noticed before, usually as a result of what was placed around that work. Similar to the observations that were made during my certificate show, *Flexible Learning*, the visual elements and aesthetic choices made by one artist visually interact with and affect how the pieces made by other artists are seen; the proximity between different styles of work highlights and enhances certain visual elements and details in new and unique ways.



Figure 7. View of the central table at the 2019 Montgomery Potters Fall Sale, Garrett Park Town Hall, Garrett Park, MD, November 2019.

The dialogue between the artwork also closely mirrors the dialogue between artists and attendees, as people spend hours each day talking about the work and talking with each other. All of the artists at this sale are responsible for selling all of the work, creating an energy that is very different from sales I have participated in where I have my own table and I am only selling my own work. At these other sales, the conversations and dialogue that occur are always grounded in my work and the pieces that I have created. While these can be rich conversations, the perspectives can be very narrow based on the narrow starting point. At the Montgomery Potters sale, conversations can be centered around individual pieces, but also can bring in multiple artists, types of work, and perspectives. Oftentimes buyers are buying a mix of work by different artists and are considering how the different styles might work or not work together as a visual

set. The variety and mixture of work that the sale community has access to creates multiple entry points to a conversation and thus lends itself to more engaging and growth-oriented dialogue.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Process and Body of Work Overview

Reflecting on the physical space and perspectives observed in these three ceramics communities over the years, the research in *Conversations in Clay* has resulted in two categories of slab-built sculptures that visually explore dialogue and attempt to communicate the experiences and growth obtained from the ceramics studio environment.

All of the work created for the exhibition started as ½ inch thick slabs rolled out using a slab roller. At this stage the surface design process begins, primarily painting each slab with various colors of slip⁹ and underglazes¹⁰. However, the clay surface is also a canvas to experiment on and try out new techniques and methods. That experimentation draws from my previous experiences and interactions as a student, teacher, and artist. If there are leftover newspaper monoprints from a lesson that week, I will add those to the surface; if one of my graduate school classes just taught me about a new type of casting slip or if I just saw a student approaching the material in an interesting way, those new ideas and materials will get incorporated into the slab surfaces. One particular slab incorporated wild, or unprocessed, clay that one of my students dug from the woods behind their house and was processing to use in their senior portfolio project (Figure 8.). These thick slabs are a repository for all of the observations and perspectives I encounter in my various ceramics communities.

⁹ The slip I use is typically made from Standard 257 Grolleg porcelain in a ratio of 2 cups slip to 2 tablespoons mason stain or other colorant (oxide, carbonate). However, a variety of other slips (stoneware slip, casting slip) are often used, all based on what I have access to and find inspiration in.

¹⁰ I exclusively use the Velvet Underglaze series by Amaco. Of all the underglazes experimented with in the past, the Velvet series provides the best color results at mid-range (cone 7/8) temperatures in a reducing kiln atmosphere.



Figure 8. Cracked, horizontal clay lines show leather hard wild clay dug by my student.

I also focus on using many different colors and brush marks, as well as the creation of different sizes and directions of lines. There is a gestural quality to the surface and how the different components of the composition interact, which closely mirrors how my students and other community members actively engage with the ceramic studio space. I attempt to create a visual dialogue within each individual composition using these strong lines, dots, and other visual marks, which helps to later enhance the creation of a visual dialogue when different forms are paired together (Figures 9., 10., 11., and 12).



Figure 9. Freshly painted slab surface.



Figure 10. Freshly painted slab surface.



Figure 11. Freshly painted slab surface.



Figure 12. Freshly painted slab surface.

After creating the surfaces, the slabs are placed on boards lined with plastic, leaving the top of the slab open to the air to allow the slip and underglaze to dry overnight (Figure 13.).



Figure 13. Two painted slabs on plastic and plasterboard ready to dry overnight.

Once the surface is dry, portions of the slab are cut out and the slabs are flung on the table or floor to stretch and alter the surface (Figure 14.). Because of the initial thickness of the slab, the surface layer of slip and underglaze may dry out when left to sit overnight, but the slab itself remains soft and plastic; when the slab is stretched and dramatically thinned out, there is a tension that is created between the soft clay and the dry surface. The surface stretches, cracks, moves, and twists all based on how dry or wet the surface is. In Figure 14. on the following page, the wide vertical lines that can be seen were stretched from what were originally thin pencil marks scratched into the surface of the thick slab.



Figure 14. Painted slab after it has undergone stretching.

This is a technique that was first introduced to me by my high school teacher, Natalia Kormeluk, and is a technique that I was immediately drawn to because of how it allowed me to give up some control over the surface. I can be more experimental with my choices when initially designing the surface, because no matter what is done at the beginning of the process, the stretching and altering of the clay is going to change that surface in often unpredictable ways. There is a clear connection between this process and how members of a community are altered and changed based on how they interact with the space and the other individuals in that space. The surface of the clay is manipulated and changed based on how the clay slab interacts with and comes in contact with the table or the floor.

Once the slabs are prepped and stretched, I immediately start building with them and make choices about how each piece I build interacts with other pieces, all based on my experiences reflected on earlier.

The work that is created generally falls into two categories. The first group is composed of small groupings of larger, slab-built sculptures and focuses on demonstrating moments of how dialogue and conversation affect individuals in a group. Drawing on my experiences as an artist, a teacher, and a student, when individuals interact in a space there is both a direct dialogue (conversation, critique) and an indirect dialogue (individual observation) that occur.

In these sculptures, the concept of direct dialogue is demonstrated through the manipulated and stretched forms and how the different sculptures in the grouping directly affect each other. Each grouping starts as 2-5 individual cylindrical pieces placed directly next to each other; the forms of these pieces are then stretched and altered using my hands and other various tools, allowing for the alterations of one piece to directly press into and manipulate the form of the pieces surrounding it (Figure 15., Figure 16.). This results in protrusions on one form and matching depressions on another form; the effects of these alterations represent the direct dialogue and conversation that occur in the ceramics studio as members of the community interact and verbally share their ideas and opinions with one another.

Due to the fact that the pieces are created while the clay is still plastic, some of the slip and underglaze on the surface is still wet or becomes wet again when moisture is drawn to the surface during the stretching and rolling stages of the process; thus, when the groupings are formed and manipulated, some of the wet underglaze and slip transfers from one piece to another, leaving a ghost print. The transfer of underglaze and other surface decoration from one piece to another represents the indirect dialogue that occurs in the ceramics studio as a result of individual observation. Even if people working in a group are not directly interacting or engaging in conversation, there is still a dialogue that occurs as a result of the observations they make of each other's work and methods while moving through the same space.



Figure 15. Large slab sculptures before alterations are made to create direct/indirect dialogue.



Figure 16. Large slab sculptures after alterations are made to create direct/indirect dialogue.

These groupings also draw on the observations made when my students learn a new technique. Even when individuals start with the same information, based on their experiences and perspective in the space they might end up with drastically different results. Each grouping is composed of sculptures that are made from 1-2 different initial slabs; some groupings are mixed and matched, while others are fully constructed from one large slab. While the surface was initially painted the same, the way the clay was handled, cut, and put together is unique to each sculpture. Some groupings also are pulled apart after the forms are altered, allowing the viewer to see the indirect dialogue that occurs as well as representing the lasting effects dialogue has on a person, even when that person is no longer a part of the community in which the dialogue took place.

After the pieces are bisque-fired, they are sprayed with a concentrated solution of soda-ash and water to highlight how the groupings are interacting. By spraying the grouping all at once, some parts of the pieces are covered up or shielded by other pieces in the grouping; based on their location in the space and relationship with the other pieces, the surface of each piece is altered. After the firing, the surfaces touched by the soda-ash have a noticeable difference in surface quality and color than the areas that were shielded. Each step in the process, from creating the slab to forming the sculptures to glazing the surface is meant to consider how the individual pieces are affected by what is happening around them.

The second category of work created consists of a similar group of slab-built sculptures; however, they are much smaller in size and are each created individually, only to be placed and arranged together after their final firing. Each of these sculptures is meant to represent a single member of a studio or community and all of the individual qualities, experiences, and growth that each community member brings to and takes away from the space. Each piece is constructed

and cut from the same template and then altered individually (Figure 17., 18.). While these sculptures may start with the same information and template (like students, artists, and community members), I purposefully try to give each piece its own personality and character; they end up with their own individual surface and form, transforming them into something unique and not replicable.

These sculptures are meant to be placed together in different sized groupings in the gallery. The relationships between their individual forms are meant to visually capture the motion of the studio environment and the interaction that occurs as different members of a community interact and move through the studio space, physically bumping into each other while at the same time conceptually and creatively exchanging ideas and dialogue. Depending on where these pieces are placed in the space, they take on their own perspective based on their relationship to the larger group and visual conversation in the gallery.



Figure 17. Template used to cut initial slabs for small, slab-built sculptures.



Figure 18. Small, slab-built sculptures cut from same template in leather hard stage, post alterations.

The majority of the pieces created for the exhibition were fired using the gas kiln at The Field School in Washington, DC. The work was fired to cone 7 (between $\sim 2130^{\circ}$ F and $\sim 2185^{\circ}$ F) in a reduction kiln atmosphere. There is a communal aspect to this kiln and how the pieces have been fired because I rarely have the chance or ability to fill an entire kiln by myself. The work is always fired alongside student work and has to fit in with the varying shapes and sizes of work that my students and fellow ceramics teacher create (Figure 19., Figure 20., Figure 21.). While the specifics of the effects this has on the individual pieces were not studied, it is important to note that many of the pieces in the exhibition had to be fired in multiple different firings. This inherently causes some variation in the surface because each atmospheric firing and schedule is different, based on factors such as the weather, the length of firing, how the kiln was stacked, and other components. Each piece has its own visual history and experience based on how it interacted with the other forms and space around it.



Figure 19. View of kiln stack from May 2019 firing.



Figure 20. View of kiln stack from February 2020 firing.



Figure 21. View of kiln stack from March 2020 firing.

Exhibition Installation and Final Body of Work

The body of work produced for the *Conversations in Clay* research was exhibited at the Hodson Gallery in the Tatem Arts Center at Hood College from September 4 through September 20, 2020 (Figures 22. to 38.). The exhibition included works from both categories of slab-built sculptures discussed in the previous section (Process and Body of Work Overview). In this section, the two categories of work will be referred to as the Group Dialogue series and the Individual Growth series.

The Group Dialogue series, consisting of small groupings of large, slab-built sculptures, was primarily exhibited on pedestals in a single line against the large, center wall of the gallery. While the work in this series creates interesting conversations when multiple groupings are viewed together, the focus of the series is meant to be on how the pieces demonstrate both indirect and direct dialogue within each individual grouping. By placing the series along the large, central wall, viewers were able to choose how they wanted to engage with the series based on where they were located in the gallery space. If the viewer stood at either end of the gallery or against the wall in between any of the groupings, the viewer's chosen perspective allowed them to see the conversations created between multiple groupings. If the viewer instead chose to stand directly in front of a particular grouping, enough visual space was maintained between groupings to allow for the viewer to focus in on the individual conversations created by the color, form, and texture within that particular grouping.

The Individual Growth series, consisting of small, slab-built sculptures cut from the same template and then altered, encompassed two different arrangements within the gallery. The first arrangement placed pieces in this series on various shelves hung around the gallery. The shelves were hung at varying heights to challenge the viewer to engage with the pieces from varying

perspectives. Higher shelves require a different perspective than lower shelves or shelves at eye-level. The physical height of each individual viewer also comes in to play, as what might be considered eye-level for one viewer may not be the same for another viewer who is taller or shorter. The changes in perspective were meant to provide the viewer with an active viewing experience as they moved through the gallery and examined each piece, not a passive experience.

The second arrangement of the Individual Growth series made use of larger pedestals placed around the gallery, also at varying heights. Along with a few pieces from the Group Dialogue series, these large pedestals were filled with 15 – 20 pieces of the Individual Growth series. These groupings were meant to capture and directly demonstrate the energy and dialogue that occurs when many different individuals enter into the ceramics studio environment. The pieces were placed in close proximity to each other to ensure the maximum amount of visual dialogue would occur.

While creating the body of work, I had envisioned and planned many possible ways to set up the exhibition. However, as I entered the gallery and started the process of placing the work, new conversations began to emerge between different pieces and the exhibition set-up became a direct response to those conversations and that experience. Some of these conversations that emerged included how the different pieces interacted with each other from across the gallery, as well as how the shadows of the pieces, cast by intentionally strong gallery lighting, interacted with one another. The final result of the *Conversations in Clay* exhibition presented the body of work in a unique and meaningful way that both captured and furthered the conversations that the work was created from.



Figure 22. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 23. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 24. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 25. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 26. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 27. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 28. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 29. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.

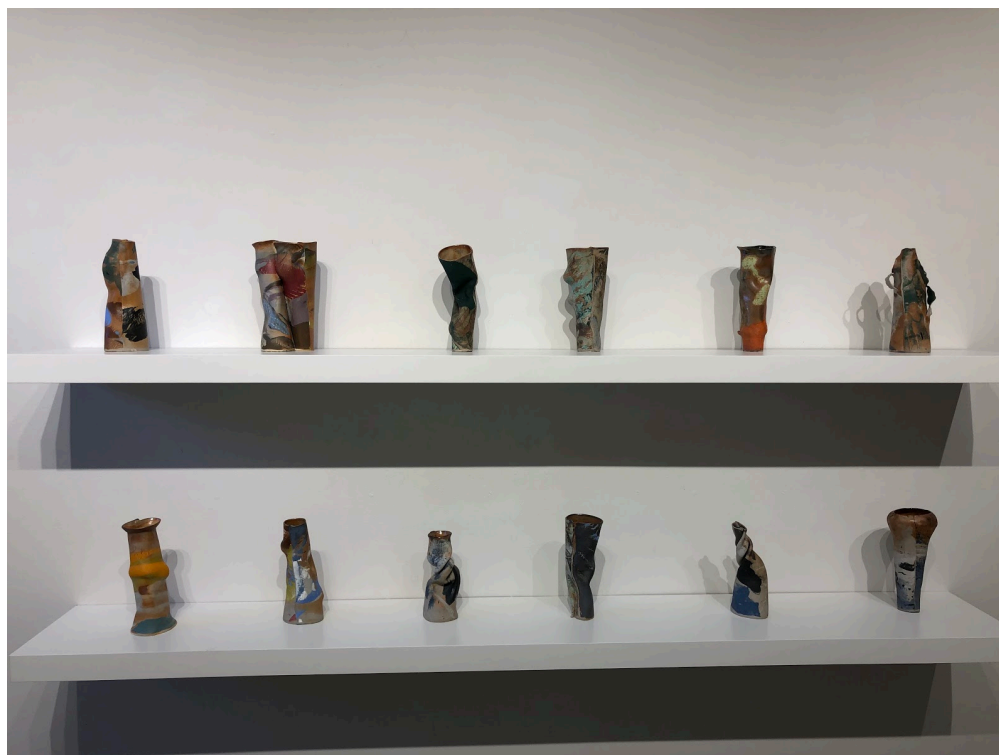


Figure 30. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 31. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 32. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 33. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 34. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 35. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 36. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 37. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.



Figure 38. *Conversations in Clay* Exhibition at Hood College's Hodson Gallery.

CONCLUSION

When starting this thesis, the primary driving force behind the research was my desire as a teacher to understand how to foster a stronger classroom community, specifically as it pertains to ceramics. The research focuses on the intersections between space and community and how the physical space of the ceramics studio encourages growth as a result of how community members are required to constantly interact and engage in dialogue with one another. The research examined this through my personal experiences and the correlation between the visual dialogue that takes place in my artwork with clay and the direct and indirect dialogue that takes place in a ceramics studio community.

After reflecting on these experiences and going through the process of creating this body of work, it was found that community learning occurs as a result of active engagement in the process. Building successful communities that foster growth and learning necessitates interaction and dialogue between community members, and community members must be willing to share their perspectives, collaborate, and learn from each other in their shared space. What makes the ceramics studio such an important space for this communal growth to occur is that it requires community members to engage in dialogue through its physical set-up: ceramic studios often have shared tablespace, centralized wheels space, and shared tools, resources, and equipment that make it necessary for community members to both directly and indirectly interact and communicate. As a result of this research, my recommendation for creating a community of practice that learns together is to continually find and develop ways to encourage people to engage actively with one another within a space. Through this active engagement and interaction, new perspectives can be experienced, and growth can occur.

Recommendations include organizing the space in ways that intentionally mix differing perspectives and expose community members to new approaches or ideas. One of the most common divides that can occur in the ceramics studio is between the hand-builders and the wheel-throwers. Arranging the space so that wheel-throwers and hand-builders are working in and around each other is one way to help encourage the cross-pollination of ideas and approaches in the studio. Similarly, making the studio a place where sharing tools is not only encouraged, but necessary, is also important. Having too many supplies and tool options can make it easy for community members to work within their own bubble. To encourage interaction within the space, there should be a strategic number of tools to allow makers to be productive, while also always having to work together and share resources. Communal, and limited, glazes, slips, brushes, wax bottles, shelves, etc. all invite and require makers to work together and communicate in the space as they navigate through the various stages of the ceramic process.

From a teaching perspective, the concept of space can be adaptable, but it is interaction in that space that is key. Creating structured projects or activities that keep students moving around both physically and in regard to process/technique can keep students from drifting into a specific mode and remaining there. As a high school student, I was fixated on the process of throwing on the wheel, which blinded me to other techniques and possibilities. It was not until I started teaching and was forced to engage with other techniques because my students were learning them that I discovered slab-building and a new understanding and appreciation for how to manipulate the clay. Projects that challenge students to work together, change up their technique or approach, and simply move around the studio and experience it from new vantage points can encourage them to see their work and the work of their community members from new perspectives.

Equally as important is designing time for community members and students to stop and share out what they are learning and doing through peer critiques and show and tells. I have found in my own process with the clay that stopping to look and listen is critical. When making the Individual Growth series, I always worked on multiple pieces at a time, and while each piece was manipulated and altered individually, I was applying what I had learned from the previous piece to the next one. I drew comparisons between how each individual piece of clay stretched and moved, and those comparisons allowed me to better see each piece as an individual and from a new perspective.

By working on multiple pieces, I can engage in a dialogue with the clay that furthers my learning, the same way that placing pieces in close proximity in a gallery can enhance and reveal new visual elements in the individual works. Similarly, by asking students and community members to consistently look and listen to what others in the community are doing through peer critiques, show and tells, and other opportunities for shared discussion, those community members will draw comparisons between ideas, work, and approaches, and will, directly and indirectly, start to pick up on new creative directions.

To promote the most growth among community members in a studio space, active engagement should be encouraged and reinforced through intentional spatial design. This intentional spatial design should always be centered around ways to promote the greatest amount of perspective mixing. Studios that are set up in ways that allow for community members to only experience a single perspective and engage in the space in a passive or static manner are not encouraged.

However, while the space can be designed to foster dialogue and help the spread of ideas, adoption of new perspectives requires final consideration and examination by the individual;

there is a large amount of personal choice that goes into taking in and applying new ideas. While my experiences reflected on in this thesis have demonstrated that engaging in community dialogue has led to my growth as an individual, I am always the driving force in how new perspectives that community dialogue provides are sorted, organized, and applied. As was stated at the beginning of this thesis, “in genuine dialogue there must be a period of assimilation as information is received and considered.”¹¹ How an individual receives and considers information stems from their own individuality and perspective. Thus, while studio design and activities desired to mix perspectives can influence artists and support their growth and learning, ultimately, they can only act as a guide for an artist’s internal dialogue as that artist works to grow creatively and discover their own voice.

¹¹ McCreight, *Design Language*, 35-36.

ADDENDUM

Overall, this research was meant to evaluate the value of community in the ceramics studio, and now more than ever, that value is evident. Near the end of this thesis process, I was confronted with new challenges as a result of the 2020 Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Teaching a tactile art form in an online setting was and continues to be an immense challenge. Additionally, my core values and pedagogy as a teacher and artist often feel in direct opposition to my new classroom reality; my classes were removed from the physical studio space that has been such an important factor in my growth and learning over the years. Beyond my own teaching, this question looms at the forefront of digital education around the globe: how can teachers best build a community that replicates the in-person-experience online? While I in no way have the answer, this research has allowed me to start distilling exactly what is most essential about ceramics and its unique studio community.

This past spring in April 2020, when I was first asked to teach online, I asked my senior students to start their 4th quarter with an assignment that correlates well to this situation and my experience with this thesis. At this point in the year, these students had been working on creating a unified body of work based on a central concept. The assignment asked students to first write down their concept in a sentence, then rewrite that sentence as a short phrase, and then, finally, rewrite that phrase as just a single word. The sentence-phrase-word activity was a distillation process that helped students strip away all connections to materials or processes, a necessary task, as during this online learning time, they no longer had access to the clay materials and tools they originally designed their work around. The goal was that this activity could begin to identify the core elements of their concept and begin to map them to a new material or process without feeling and focusing on loss.

In reflecting on this research and looking towards a full year of online learning in ceramics, I recognize that I have the same opportunity now. This research and this body of work have allowed me to distill the most essential components of what is important to me about the ceramics studio in relationship to community. This research has found that community is built, and growth occurs, when members have the opportunity to engage in dialogue, bringing both their own experiences and perspectives to the table and gaining new experiences and perspectives from the table. Whether directly or indirectly, finding opportunities to be in some type of communal space (physical or virtual) is essential to encouraging growth and learning and the exchange of ideas.

Using this research, I will intentionally apply what was learned about the importance of dialogue and interaction to my virtual class communities. While the classes have lost their physical space for the time being, they still have a virtual space where students can gather and interact; wherever there is shared space, there are still opportunities for dialogue to occur. In the end, it is not the specific space that is important, it is what that space does and provides in terms of interaction and individual and communal growth. Thus, I find myself confronted not with loss, but with excitement about how I can envision and create a new community online that still is anchored in the essential elements that have fostered my own growth over the years. This next year will simply require me to be much more intentional about the choices I make as a teacher and how I ask students and community members to engage in that space.

In completing this research, the hope is that other teachers and community members can use the research as a starting point for reflecting on their own experiences within the ceramics studio or other community spaces in their pursuit of building and reimagining their own future communities. Ultimately, as with all my experiences in ceramics over the years, teaching

ceramics online for a full year will be a new experience and provide a new perspective for me to reflect on and learn from. With new perspectives, come new opportunities for growth for my students, myself, and for our shared communities.

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