



Innovation in Learning and Teaching Ceramics Online

Peter J. Shepherd

The art and craft of ceramics is tactile and visual. Learning ceramics brings students and instructors together, and guilds are hubs and hearts of communities. Ceramics need tools, equipment and facilities – much of that is shared. What happens in a pandemic, in the isolation from each other and facilities?

Across the internet, online learning ramped up dramatically, but did not meet the needs of pottery guilds. Guilds found ways to help their members continue to some degree, but a guild's survival often depends on revenue from courses for their communities. That stopped completely. 'Pivot' and 'distance learning', buzzwords of 2020. Pottery guilds were struggling, and many were asking how can we 'pivot'?

Mississauga Potters Guild (MPG) President, Salina Szechtman, began connecting with other guilds across Ontario. 'What are you doing', and 'what can we do'? Waves of restrictions were mandated by governments at all levels. In the confusion, networking was helpful and the six guilds involved agreed to continue as the 'Cross Provincial Ceramics Network' (CPCN).

At the same time, the Canada Council for the Arts, as the principal federal organization for funding public arts, responded by streamlining the process for its Digital Strategy Fund to help artists and arts organizations find ways to adapt.

Salina made a proposal to her MPG colleagues and the CPCN: apply for a Canada Council for the Arts grant to research how guilds can offer online dynamic and interactive learning and teaching for clay. Although there is already an enormous volume of videos and workshops online for potters, they don't include any means to work in real-time with instructors looking on and giving feedback; that would be the ultimate goal.

The CPCN agreed, supporting MPG's application with a commitment to participate. The initiative was also supported by the prestigious Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art.

Two months preparing a grant submission, four months waiting, then success—the MPG was awarded the e-Clay Learning and Teaching grant. It was a moment of exhilaration and anxiety.

By the end of 2020, the project was underway. MPG's 'Team e-Clay' was the backbone of the project structure and organization, and soon hired a project manager, Lucie Gryz. CPCN morphed into the Cross-Provincial Steering Committee (CPSC) who met weekly, providing strategic direction and oversight. Within team e-Clay and CPCN there were potters with training and experience in research methods, administration, technology and teaching – a lot of strengths that would make this project a success.

There were two parallel activities for the project—identifying challenges to the ceramics communities, especially the guilds, and understanding the technological possibilities for dynamic, interactive online learning and teaching for clay. In the end, the two had to come together in one set of recommendations.

Learning from Ceramics Communities

The CPCN represented a wide cross-section of potters and guilds, but the project was committed to a much broader, community-driven research approach. The project was to engage as many voices as possible—guilds, students and instructors, rural, urban, newcomers, varied ages and ceramic experience—so that its recommendations 'would really work in practice', noted Amy Bell, president of the Ottawa guild.

Focus groups, ceramic experts in discussions, interviews with key in-

formants from ceramic programs in colleges and universities and community studios, and a session on sustainable solutions were all planned and carried out through February and March – a period of intense activity.

This research engaged over one hundred people representing fourteen communities in Ontario and five provinces across Canada, producing a rich array of information, insights and questions.

What was learned?

It's no surprise that traditional in-person community teaching is the preferred experience, especially for beginners. Online learning or 'hybrid' models impose new demands, including re-thinking course design, new teaching, learning and technology skills. These new models also create new challenges for access and accessibility, including uneven internet quality.

Participants recognized that online and hybrid courses are increasingly necessary and provide opportunities to innovate and create more professional experiences for artist-instructors – but at a greater commitment to preparation and support time. For potters, online learning can increase access to courses, especially where guilds are distant or there are safety and accessibility concerns.

The trajectory of learning was captured by Lindsay Hadcock (member and instructor at the Kingston guild) who facilitated some of the project focus groups. At the beginning she 'couldn't see it [online ceramics] working' but by the second focus group she thought 'oh, I think this is more doable than I thought' and by the third focus group 'I'd already begun planning our online classes'. She also noted how the demands of online courses create new and interesting ways to learn.

Technological Possibilities

Concurrent with the community-based research, e-Clay researched technological possibilities for online learning in clay. The objective—to come up with a web-based, user-friendly and affordable way to approximate a ceramics studio classroom using existing technologies.

Instructors and students need to interact, showing and talking while learning.

In a classroom, all this flows naturally – students gather around the instructor to watch and discuss, then practice at their own workstation with the instructor watching and giving feedback, one-on-one, immediately. In ‘distanced’ learning, technology must support this interaction between instructors and students.

With the help of a technology consultant, e-Clay’s approach was to research existing technologies and evaluate all options, and to determine what technical components are needed at different price points to create ‘virtual’ teaching and learning studios.

The wheel has already been invented

The recommended components are commonly available, familiar to most, and often already owned. They include a video camera; monitor; lighting; microphone and speaker/headset; video-conferencing capability; and controls that need to be hands-free because, as every potter has learned, clay-covered hands are not kind to technology.

The most important step in the technology research was to dovetail its findings with the community-based research and make recommendations that would meet the communities’ needs for online, dynamic interactive teaching and learning. The recommendations focussed on the key requirements for both guilds and students—instructor/student interactivity, high quality video and audio, ease of use, hands-free operation, and a tiered cost structure.

Hardware, software, and internet requirements do create barriers for some. For example, internet connectivity is uneven across the province, some equipment is novel, and not everyone is comfortable with this technology. Such barriers need to be addressed before guilds are confident in moving forward with online interactive learning. With all this in hand, e-Clay went back to the communities.

The Town Halls

In late April 2021, e-Clay brought the results of the community-based research and the technology research together at two ‘Town Hall’ online Zoom events for the research participants. Over eighty people watched the

presentation, answered topic-focused ‘polls’ and joined the ‘Kiln-side Chat’.

Much was presented and discussed, too much for this article to address (find links to more information at the end of the article). Participants were heedful of the challenges to implement online and hybrid learning in their own guilds, but discussion in the ‘Kiln-side Chat’ after the presentations was enthusiastic, with a lot of optimism. It’s worth re-iterating some typical thoughts expressed by participants. Overwhelmingly, they felt optimistic and encouraged, that the technology is very learnable with a road map and the right equipment, and that there are lots of possibilities for online learning and teaching clay.

The conclusion of the research is that online, dynamic, interactive learning and teaching is possible but there’s no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution. Workable business models, technical support, instructor training, course curricula, and ways for guilds to include glazing and firing were key pieces of the ‘toolbox’ approach presented at the Town Halls. The e-Clay project team came away from the Town Halls feeling like the recommendations can indeed work for guilds, instructors, and students of clay.

Where from Here

Actual implementation was not the planned outcome of the e-Clay project. That is to come later. The e-Clay research is an important first step towards accepting the possibilities and building a robust environment for teaching and learning clay online.

Out of the project has come a commitment to the Cross-Provincial Ceramics Network (CPCN), which has grown from the original six guilds to nine with more guilds expressing interest. Already there is talk about pooled videos, manuals, curriculum documents, instructor training, and learning technological skills.

CPCN member Anne Pedersen observed that ‘we’re going to apply for a grant to do a pilot project, and if that doesn’t happen, we’ll still have our network and we’ll see where that takes us’. That positivity is perhaps the most robust outcome of the e-Clay project – a connection between communities is growing where there was

none before – and that foretells other good outcomes in the future.

Online communications and technology is a barrier for many, but for others the new medium has broken down barriers. There can be a 21st century social evolution for pottery guilds, building on the new connectivity and possibilities of the internet but have its heart in personal connections—as communities always have.

To find out more about the project’s findings or to join the team that takes the work into the next phase, go to www.mississaugapotters.com/e-Clay or contact eclay@mississaugapotters.com. ■

Peter Shepherd is a photographer, sculptor and occasional writer in Toronto ON. He can be reached at water-shed96@icloud.com.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.



Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada