

Archie Bray: The Social Learning Characteristics of Artists

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Artists continue to develop and learn throughout their careers. Many choose to complete a university course of study including a studio education. As an art educator, I am concerned with how artists learn after they completed formal education. Singerman's (1999) *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* raises questions about the training of artists. Who trains artists and where they receive training have been the subjects of debate for years. As a ceramic artist/educator, I am interested in investigating how artists – specifically ceramic artists – learn.

In a summer art course, I met two young ceramicists. We discussed their art, their ceramic/art education, and finally, their plans for structuring their careers as artists and educators. At some point in their discussion, each artist, with conviction, mentioned the Archie Bray Ceramic Foundation in Helena, Montana, a residency program for ceramic artists, also known as *the Bray*. This conversation left me wondering: What are the needs and characteristics of learners who become ceramic artists? Art education research has not covered the topic of ceramics education fully, especially concerning adult postgraduate ceramic learners. I developed this study to help me investigate this question.

The purpose of this study is to discover and analyze the social learning methods and characteristics of artists as they move beyond the university to a residency program. The Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts (the Bray) selects residents who have actively trained in the ceramics field for six or more years; participants in this study were long-term, two-year artist residents working at the Bray during the summer of 2006. I

chose the Bray because it is the oldest ceramics-only residency program in the United States. Past Bray residents have taught or are teaching in university ceramics programs around the world. The participants are trained adult ceramic artists who bring substantial prior knowledge to their ceramic studies. The study examines the participant's experiences during their residency at the Bray. The study documents this institution's role in these resident artists' education and career in ceramics. At the Bray, artists collaborate with artists as they work together sharing space. This study questions the kinds of learning experiences that can occur at the Bray and whether these experiences are profitable to expert adult art learners.

I began with the question how, if at all, adult ceramic artists learn at the Bray. During the study, sub-questions emerged. These questions are (a) If the resident artists at the Bray learn from each other, what are the characteristics of their social-cultural learning? (b) What characteristics of high-achieving expert adult learners do the Bray residents exhibit? and (c) What are the educational needs of high-achieving adult artists after the university degree? As an art teacher, I was also interested in studying if there was something in the residency program that I could adapt into my high school art program.

Methodology

This qualitative study incorporates data collection from direct observation, eleven resident interviews, and personal photographs. As Gerson and Horowitz (2002) explained, qualitative research involves a direct encounter with the world. In a form of qualitative research, ethnography, the researcher focuses on a single community (Garson, 2005). The intent of qualitative ethnographic research is to gather a holistic picture of the

topic with emphasis on describing the experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them along with relevant others (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). Qualitative research is exploratory in nature; the design of this study explores how the learning methods of artists affect their learning.

The observations, interviews and photographs were collected during a month long study of the Bray. This study presents data that describes what goes on at the Bray. To clearly understand this data, analyzing and interpreting becomes important, as these reveal patterns of both learning and experiences. Qualitative methods begin with observation of an occurrence and its characteristics. The field notes and photographs in this study represent observations of ceramic artists working at the Bray.

I designed interviews to gather information that I could not directly observe in life. I wrote open-ended questions, asking the residents to reflect on their time at the Bray. I created a sequence of questions that covered general themes, which helped establish the parameters of the study. An advantage of the qualitative approach is its flexibility. This approach allowed me to move back and forth, and when theoretical insights prompted, to make adjustments to the questions and the research design (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the weeks of data collecting at the Bray, this flexibility led to new field notes, new interviews, and more informative data.

The investigation focus is on the types of interactions that took place. The analysis of the data considers how these experiences can lead to learning and identifies any changes in careers of the participants. The types of learning examined are collaborative, cooperative, and situated. These learning situations are part of a Constructivist Theory of Learning. According to constructivist theory, knowledge is not a

fixed object. Learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences (Jacob, 1999; Jarvis, 2005). To understand the Bray experience I questioned the residents, asking them questions including: Why do artists go to the Bray? Do they gain or sacrifice? Does the Bray meet the needs of the gifted or talented? The objective in this study is to interpret the Archie Bray Resident experience in relation to the educational practices that might have implications for ceramic education.

The study concentrates on the learning of adult ceramic artists. After completing their Master's programs, talented graduates leave expecting to be prepared professional artists. Why do these artists go to the Bray? What kind of place is the Bray and is it unique? These are a few of the questions I investigated during my time at the Bray. A summary of their answers, along with my personal observations makes up this study.

The Archie Bray Foundation

The Archie Bray Foundation is a well-established residency program for emerging ceramic artists. For nearly half a century, the Foundation has provided international leadership in the ceramic arts. The history of this Montana ceramic foundation parallels the development of the ceramic arts and ceramic education in the United States. Some leading ceramicists have worked at the Bray. As these artists have matured artistically, their careers have led them to university ceramic positions, museum collections, gallery exhibitions, and work in potteries around the world. Collectively, they influence ceramic education and ceramic art. The goal of the Bray is to create a community gathering of experts who can work together sharing resources while each cultivates their own art. This ideal has become part of the culture of the Bray. Artist working in an environment can

share artistic values, beliefs, traditions, and customs, incorporating them into the lives of artists interested in being at the Bray.

Residents apply to work at the Bray. Those accepted are often skilled, self-directed, serious artists. The goal of the application process is to weed out applicants who are not mature, hardworking, self-motivated, committed, budding artists. According to thirteen-year Resident Director DeWeese (personal interview, June 27, 2006) the application process is rarely wrong. Applicants must be able to travel to Montana to work in a rustic, somewhat isolated area away from family, work, and friends. The applicants are not novice ceramicists: They have completed years of basic ceramic training to earn a Bachelor or Master of Fine Arts. Residents do not come with the need for more schooling, guidance or teacher-assigned problems. Rather, residents find their own way, gaining information through conversations with peers and visiting artists. The Bray offers working opportunities to artists through which the important adult characteristics of perseverance, experimentation, and risk-taking can lead to artistic gain. The program offers residents an opportunity to work with artists from around the world who have a range of experiences and diverse aesthetic approaches, cultures, and perspectives (DeWeese, 2001).

The artists complete their own work with subsidies in the form of studio space and grants or fellowships for a two-year period. The type of learning that goes on at the Bray does not include intentional instruction similar to what they might have experienced in a university setting, but it does offer *on-the-job learning*. Such situational learning, like an apprenticeship, can facilitate artistic development as artists naturally develop and mature.

The sub-question data

Focusing on the answer to each sub question helped me to conclude the question how, if at all, adult ceramic artists learn at the Bray. The first sub question: If the resident artists at the Bray learn from each other, what are the characteristics of their social-cultural learning, led me to the constructivist approach to understanding art learning.

Constructivism explains three types of learning: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and situated learning. Because the context of the learning situation affects the results, context is important in this study (Jacob, 1999; Stokrocki, 1986). The context in which individuals learn is important in providing meaning and deepening understanding of concepts, procedures, information, or skills. In a learning environment, the type of experience affects the amount of gain for the individual. Collaborative learning is the type that happens when more than one-person work together toward the same goal. Some instances of collaborative learning are also cooperative. Cooperative learning is learning that a teacher designs to facilitate the accomplishment of a product, outcome, or goal (Jacob, 1999). Situated learning is a term used by education researchers to identify learning affected by context (Jacob, 1999). In situated learning, learning is in the active process of doing, not reading, talking, or studying about an activity (Jacob, 1999).

The kinds of learning experiences possible at the Bray support the constructivist theory of learning. In a collaborative/cooperative structure, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and to other members of the group (Johnson, 1991). The findings support the statement that most artists at the Bray shared and collaborated as an everyday activity. Interviews revealed statements that peer interaction; equipment and

materials; and the experienced artists they met while working at the Bray contributed to resident learning. The Bray is a community of individuals who work with clay as an artistic medium. Every interaction during any day has the potential to be a learning experience.

A resident stated: “We share knowledge, and we ask each other, ‘How do you do it?’ We help each other. There is no secret. We are all sharing what we can do” (L, personal interview, June 26, 2006). The philosophy of the Bray (i.e., creating a gathering of a community of experts who can work together sharing resources) sets the tone of the environment for interaction and social-cultural learning.

The second sub question: What characteristics of high-achieving expert adult learners do the Bray residents exhibit learning, led me to the study of adult learners. Residents at the Bray are selected learners already trained in ceramic skills and possessing expert knowledge. The post-graduates are adult learners with adult needs and learning characteristics. According to Roberts (1989), adults are responsible consumers of their own educational investment. Knowles, (1984) emphasized that adult or mature learners are autonomous and self-directed with a need to be free to direct themselves in active learning. Adult learning programs must accommodate this propensity for learner control.

High-achieving individuals are motivated to work hard and make the most of their skills and opportunities (Li, 1996). The Bray ceramic residents, with advanced training, may have developed high-achieving, characteristics because they are highly motivated; they are creatively intelligent or have innate aptitude (i.e., talent) in art. In any domain, gifted or highly skilled individuals show an intense drive to master certain skills, a strong

ability to focus, and a strong sense of nonconformity (Winner, 1999). Atkinson and Raymor (1978) and Winner (1999) agreed that high achievers have a high level of motivation, which drives them to dedicate more time to achievement. One resident said, “I am really focused. My life is totally consumed by my art, and the Bray allows you to do that. It just provides everything for you. You don’t have to worry about getting anything. The clay is right here and the facilities. It provides a focused time to concentrate” (T, personal interview, June 15, 2006).

The experiences the Bray residents bring with them help them form new learning situations. Most residents were self-regulating, autonomous, self-directed, goal-oriented, and able to focus. My study supports the conclusion that high-achieving learners have characteristics that help them benefit from their time at the Bray.

The third sub question: What are the needs of high-achieving adult artists for education after the university degree, led me to study residency programs. Residency programs are programs that support artists by providing time in an environment conducive to the artists’ creation of new work (Alliance of Artist Communities, 2006). A residency program brings together a group of high achievers in one or more areas of study for the purpose of focused work. These programs assemble a number of creative artists in a setting that encourages conversation, collaboration, and sharing of perspectives. They also make it possible for participating artists to take time away from dealing with intrusive concerns so that they can attend to their work while supported wholly or partly by the program. The Bray is a residency program that provides an opportunity for emerging artists to learn in a situation in which the environment becomes a component of the learning. One resident said, “I heard about the Bray ever since I

started becoming serious in ceramics. I was told that I should come here if I wanted to get better and have the opportunity to get ahead and be a professional that was some of the reason” (D, personal interview, June 21, 2006). Another said, “My studio was a big difference. There is a real solitude that I liked but I was looking for something else because I had always made work in a kind of educational environment surrounded by other people and lots of other input” (Tr, personal interview, June 23, 2006).

Findings

Findings reveal that many Bray residents collaborate as they work together sharing space, skills, and knowledge. The findings also indicate that residents, adults who have become high-achieving experts in their field, experience situated learning during their focused study at the Bray. The choice of coming to the Archie Bray Foundation places the individuals in an environment with access to talented peers who approach, match, and even surpass their own abilities and ambitions. The residents are experts with high abilities, yet some did not show observable benefit during the study at the Bray.

Secondary Art Implications

The study also explores whether the nature of the learning at the Bray can have implications for secondary education in art. Many high school students have no special ceramic background. The high school teacher usually treats his or her students as motivated but not self-directed. If students are new to the medium, teachers usually begin with techniques on using this new material.

Unlike the Bray program, there are no adult experts among high school ceramics students. Whereas the Bray resident is self-directed, a high school student is not likely to be ready for that responsibility. Cooperative learning, directed by the teacher, can be

included in the high school program. High school students learn well from each other, but the basic knowledge is usually teacher-distributed. Some students learn they can share as the residents at the Bray share, but they need the adult from whom to learn.

The residency programs are for mature learners, including artists who may be motivated, self-directed, and self-confident, and who have a strong sense of purpose. High school students are motivated, but usually they lack the mature adult characteristics. As expected, high school students may not have the maturity levels or the art expertise to effectively succeed as a self-directed mature learner.

Conclusions

The three types of data collection methods (i.e., direct observation, interviews, and photographs) offer a clearer picture of the relevance of the Archie Bray resident artist program to ceramic artist education today. The interpretation of the data provides insights that can be relevant to others. The results may be of value to studio art educators, as knowledge of learner characteristics could improve instruction. The successful and unsuccessful characteristics of residency programs might be useful to educators working with adult education, gifted and talented education, and high achievement in the arts.

The study concludes high-achieving adult learners at the Bray are self-confident and self-directed, and they direct their own learning. Some residents are collaborators, gaining their knowledge from the peers with whom they work and share, whereas other residents did not collaborate or exhibit adult artistic behavior during the month-long study. Several resident studios revealed no artwork progressing during the study period. These residents may have worked off site, studied, reflected, or relaxed. They were at the Bray, just not observably motivated and working in their studios. This leads to the

implication that ability is not enough to be a successful resident; rather, a better indicator may include mature adult learner characteristics. My study supports the conclusion that successful residents benefit from mature and high-achieving characteristics along with ceramics abilities.

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