

Can British Ceramics Education Survive?

In 1980 in England and Wales there were thirteen degree courses in ceramics and in Scotland there were four.¹ In 2010 there are four courses in England and Wales and none in Scotland.² Since 2000 the renowned studio ceramics courses in Bath, Bristol, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Camberwell and Harrow have all closed.³ This paper looks at the reasons for the precipitous decline in ceramics courses in the UK and uses firsthand accounts from those who have taught on British ceramics courses between 1970 and 2010 to offer some explanations as to why this has happened.⁴ I will begin by listing the main issues put forward by the respondents to my research for course closures before going on to look in more detail at the closure of the ceramics course at my own university in Bristol and to end on a more optimistic note with a discussion of the thriving ceramics programme at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff.⁵

Numbers

A frequent refrain in my research has been that the 'numbers' on ceramics courses simply don't add up. There are not enough students applying to do the courses which means they are under subscribed and therefore not economically viable. In my own institution the mark of a failing course is currently one that does not recruit 15 or more full-time equivalent students in each year. I have spoken recently to staff on ceramics degree courses where there are around 25 students across three years. The economic reality is that a course with so few students is losing money and the course is no longer viable but it is also important to point out that these closures began in the early years of the twenty first century – many years before the current global economic downturn. Ingrid Murphy, Programme Director in Ceramics at Cardiff stated that, 'sadly economic solvency is the only way a programme of

study in any field will survive these days, especially with the proposed funding cuts from [government]. No matter how sound your pedagogical principles are, how excellent your teaching/research achievements are it is the balance sheets that matter. These sheets have, and will inform decisions made about department's survival and closure'. Whilst the issue of numbers is the ultimate reason why so many courses have closed, there are several factors which have led to this situation.

Secondary education and health and safety

The majority of the respondents to my research highlighted the lack of ceramics teaching in schools as a contributory factor in the closure of ceramics courses at Higher Education level. Writing in *Ceramic Review* in 2006 school teacher Tim Rees argued that 'clay work in primary and secondary education is affected by many issues, with possibly two of the most damaging factors being a lack of knowledge in untrained staff or a fear of health and safety issues'.⁶ Ceramics is taught much less often in secondary schools than it was in the 1960s and 1970s and students moving in to further and higher education no longer have to do a foundation course before their arts degree so they have less contact with ceramics as a material.

Fashion

In the 1960s and 1970s ceramics was fashionable. Students tend not to see ceramics in this light anymore and see it as techniques rather than ideas based. As Professor of ceramics on the soon to close Camberwell College ceramics degree course (University of the Arts, London), Richard Slee described this issue as one of 'credibility'.⁷ According to Slee ceramics is 'simply unfashionable [and] has few modern role models...The alternative beliefs of the old hippy crafts of the 60s are long gone, the high carbon footprint of ceramic craft

means that it can never recover that high alternative status'. An academic colleague of mine suggested that a fine art course offers the chance to 'express oneself' whereas 'the discourse of ceramics all rotated around techniques and processes'.⁸ Another felt that if ceramics courses had 'a more theoretical basis they may have survived'.⁹

Over provision & economics

Richard Slee argues that 'there were too many courses to sustain' and it is a common factor in the responses I had to my research that by the early 1980s there were too many courses offering ceramics and not enough students 'to go around'. In the 1970s students received maintenance grants and their fees were paid. By the 1990s maintenance grants ended for all but the poorest students and tuition fees and student loans were introduced. For students facing debts of up to \$60k upon graduation, the freedom to do a degree in ceramics was gone. Decisions about the vocational viability of courses came in to play. Students graduating from a pure ceramics course might be less employable than one from a design and applied arts course whose skills might be perceived as more transferable.¹⁰ Choosing ceramics as a degree course now has real financial implications.

The University of the West of England, Bristol – a case study

In Bristol ceramics as a stand alone subject began in 1961 with a Diploma in Art and Design (Ceramics).¹¹ The school became part of Bristol Polytechnic in 1970 and in 1977 started to offer a degree course in ceramics. The course closed in 2001 following a short review of undergraduate provision within the Faculty.¹² **[Figure 1: Walter Keeler, throwing demonstration, Bristol Polytechnic, circa 1985. Photograph copyright University of the West of England, Bristol]**

In a recent interview with the Dean when the decision to close the ceramics course was made – Professor Paul Gough – the issues which led to the closure were clear.¹³ Several staff were nearing retirement age and there was a university voluntary severance scheme which meant there was ‘natural wastage’ of staff without the need for redundancies. Furthermore the course was struggling to find the twenty students per year which they were aiming at – Gough argued that ‘it wasn’t really a quality issue as ceramics did well – it was a recruitment issue’. Interestingly Gough did not consider the space hungry element of ceramics courses as a contributory factor to the closure at Bristol but he did mention increased regulations around health and safety and the costs of running gas kilns.¹⁴

Roger Turrell, course leader in Ceramics at Bristol when the course closed, has a slightly different take on why the course closed but agrees with Gough’s main point, namely that the closure was the result of no one factor but that a number of issues made it inevitable.

[Figure 2: Main ceramics studio, University of the West of England, Bristol, circa 1999. Photograph copyright University of the West of England, Bristol] Turrell felt there was an over provision of courses in the UK and unlike Gough he felt that by the end they were taking students who would not have been offered a place a few years before because they had to take virtually everyone who applied. This has been repeated by the majority of the respondents to my research – basically the pool of students applying to do ceramics has ‘dried up’. Turrell stated that whilst other courses at Bristol were increasing numbers year on year, ceramics were gradually declining and therefore having to be financially subsidised by the university.

In a time of economic instability management do not have the luxury of sentiment – despite Bristol having renowned makers and academics such as Turrell, Walter Keeler, Mo Jupp and

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Nick Homoky the decision to close the course was entirely one of economics. Ceramics is in Walter Keeler's words essentially 'expensive and very unattractive in a balance sheet environment'.¹⁵

The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Whilst the majority of the respondents to my research have been less than upbeat, I would not like to paint a picture of universal despair as the reality is that the field is changing and everyone is trying hard to adapt to the change. Programme Director of Ceramics at the University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Ingrid Murphy, wrote to voice her concern 'that the very title of your paper may give the international ceramic community the impression that not only are we an endangered species but we are in fact extinct'. Murphy felt strongly that my paper should also reflect on 'the positive areas of success and growth in Ceramic education in Britain'. Reflecting on the negativity prevalent in the UK ceramics field Murphy argued that 'it is up to the providers left to ensure that we surmount the prevailing negativity and pro-actively engage in discussion at all levels and share good practice in order to best ensure continuation of the subject'.

Over the past five years in Cardiff there has been a '25% increase in undergraduate numbers' and the growth in PhD and Postgraduate provision has meant there are now 'approximately 125 full-time ceramic students across all the levels'. It is the largest cohort the department has ever known in its fifty year history. According to Murphy 'the number of applications to the undergraduate programme has not increased significantly...it does indicate that there is a diminishing pool of national applicants, as a programme ceases to recruit there is no flood of applicants elsewhere...it would appear that students wishing to study ceramics at HE almost have to strive to do it, they are frequently the only student in

their cohort specialising in ceramics and all too often have difficulty receiving specialist tuition or technical support'. Whilst the Cardiff picture is currently healthy, the shrinking of ceramics as a specific area of study has left the subject weaker as a whole.

The future

Many established, avant-garde ceramicists in the UK have been able to make the work they do because they had a teaching job to ensure a regular income and didn't rely solely on the sales from their making to put food on their respective tables. These artists could make challenging, thought-provoking and often expensive work without the absolute need to sell but the newer generations of makers are unlikely to have the financial crutch of a teaching job in higher education to allow them to make the work they would like to.

We are now in a position where even the few remaining ceramics courses are in peril and every month seems to bring more bad news. Bucks New University announced the closure of their Ceramics and Glass awards two weeks ago. Many ceramics courses have amalgamated with other media specific courses to become degrees in contemporary crafts and applied arts. The argument in their favour is that they allow students the 'freedom to explore other courses and engage in wider theoretical debates'¹⁶ However, Claudia Clare argued that ceramics courses 'seem to be gliding gracefully into the 3D design blancmange favoured by academia'.¹⁷ (Blancmange – a kind of vanilla pudding).

Whilst the UK is suffering badly in the world of ceramics pedagogy, there are signs of a wider and possibly spreading malaise. Janet De Boos has described the situation in Australia as 'in crisis'¹⁸ with a seventy-five percent decrease in the number of ceramics departments since the 1980s. Ceramics in the United States is seen in the UK as a field in rude health

where there are such a plethora of courses at all levels that there will always be somewhere for ceramicists to teach, exhibit and interact with other ceramicists. The reality is perhaps less utopian but still a far cry from the apparent dystopia of the British ceramics scene – which could be considered a salutary example. However, there is cautious optimism from Walter Keeler (the first and last Professor of Ceramics at Bristol), ‘I think the so-called crafts are strong and are gradually being absorbed into the general body of the arts, as the idea of a hierarchy of divorced disciplines recedes... This coupled with a growing constituency for skill, is cause for cautious optimism - long-term though it may be’.¹⁹

I will finish by giving the final word to Ingrid Murphy, ‘It is sad to be so unromantic about it but longevity and reputation is no guarantee of survival as Harrow’s closure has shown us, it is not the time to look at our wonderful history but to determine the future of our discipline’.

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¹ Craftsmen Potters Association (1980. *Potters* (Fifth Edition), pp.135-142. Definitive figures are not possible in such a short article. This is partly because of nomenclature – some courses which use the term 3D design

might in fact be heavily dependent upon ceramics whilst others may only have a very small percentage of ceramics teaching. For the purposes of this paper I am referring to courses which privilege ceramics in their title or course for which I know ceramics is the main focus.

² There are still a number of postgraduate ceramics courses, notably in Bath, Cardiff and at the Royal College of Art in London.

³ In 1980 the courses in England and Wales were in Bath (Corsham), Bristol, Cardiff, Farnham, Leicester, Loughborough, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, Wolverhampton and in London (Camberwell, Central School, Harrow and Roehampton). In Scotland there were courses in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In 2010 the courses in England and Wales are in Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Farnham, Preston and London (University of the Arts, formerly the Central School).

⁴ I wrote letters to thirty people who have taught or still teach on ceramics courses around the UK and asked for their responses to the themes of this paper. Responses are anonymised unless the respondent chose to waive their anonymity.

⁵ A more detailed version of this paper will be published at a later date to include all of the responses to my research.

⁶ Rees, Tim (July/August 2006). 'Curriculum Vital', *Ceramic Review*, London, p.48.

⁷ Email to the author from Richard Slee, 23rd November 2009.

⁸ Email from an anonymous academic on a recently closed ceramics course, 27th November 2009.

⁹ Interview with Roger Turrell, 28th October 2009.

¹⁰ Poor management has been cited by several respondents but in many respects this has been characterised by a failure to properly engage with staff and students once the decision to close the course had been taken. Further perceived failures have been in a failure to properly advertise courses to prospective students but these failures are again anecdotal. However, even with courses such as Camberwell, where a decision to close the course in 2007 was rescinded by the college following widespread condemnation from the ceramics community, it was eventually closed to new entrants in 2009 as the course was no longer economically viable with the small numbers of students enrolling each year and the high overhead costs of keeping the course open.

¹¹ At the art school of the Royal West of England Academy.

¹² It was partly replaced by a Degree in Drawing and the Applied Arts.

¹³ A new Associate Dean was brought in whose job it was to 'have a hard look at the Faculty's portfolio of courses'. Gough told the Associate Dean that he would like a course with drawing and once it was decided that a course would go (which turned out to be ceramics) the course which replaced it was predicated on drawing. (interview with Professor Paul Gough, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Creative Arts, 4th November 2009).

¹⁴ A number of respondents have mentioned the extent to which ceramics is seen by management as space hungry compared to other courses such as graphics, illustrations etcetera which can take many more students but take up much less space.

¹⁵ Email to the author from Walter Keeler, 4th December 2009.

¹⁶ Clare, (2007), p.28.

¹⁷ Clare, Claudia (November/December 2007). 'Ways of learning', *Ceramic Review*, p.28.

¹⁸ DeBoos, Janet (July 2008). 'The changing face of ceramics education', *The Journal of Australain Ceramics*, p.24.

¹⁹ Email to the author from Walter Keeler, 4th December 2009.