

## Clay Days: The Creative Use of Clay with Special Children

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The introduction to *Clay Days* explains the idea behind the Artist in Residence project at St. Patrick's Special School, Enniscorthy, which in turn gave rise to the book.

In summary, the main aim was to develop an approach to working with clay as a creative medium, in a special school setting, which would be both practical and enjoyable for the children. Parallel with this approach, the project aimed to develop the pottery skills of a teacher in the school so that the process could continue after the visiting teacher had moved on. Arising from these two practical issues, it aimed to document the progress of the children and to leave a practical handbook which other teachers could make use of in their schools.

The author, Anne Heffernan, aimed at a "low-tech" approach - using the minimum of tools and equipment and suggesting that teachers should not be put off this medium due to a lack of "expensive and extensive equipment." She states that the over-riding aim of the project is "to develop the student's creativity, co-ordination and confidence."

Wexford Arts Centre and St. Patrick's Special School are to be highly commended for undertaking this progressive programme with a group of pupils and their teacher. The children involved were a group of teenage pupils with a moderate degree of learning disability and it is clear from the approach taken that a high level of pre-planning had occurred. It is also clear that the pupils and teacher taking part were highly motivated and enthusiastic, hence the title *Clay Days*. The pupils frequently told the author how they loved their "clay days"!

The book -- partly an account of the project with lots of excellent photographs and figures, and partly an instructive document for teachers -- is laid out, very clearly and simply, as a working manual. Chapters with titles such as: *Organising Your Workspace, Materials and Preparation, Ratio of Teachers to Children, Cutting the Clay, Making a Ball*, may seem too simple for explanation but are really quite fundamental for a teacher contemplating using clay for the first time with a group of children. The author says, "If you organise your workroom and storage in advance, it will make the whole process much easier for everyone." The reviewer would say that time spent on these issues of preparation and organisation may save hours of frustration and grief for both pupils and teacher.

Emphasising a slightly different aspect of the approach to working with clay, Ernst Röttger, writing in 1962 (*Creative Clay Craft*, 1971) says, "The basis of all creative activity is order." The Irish saying goes "*Tús maith - leath na hoibre*" - never more so than in a room full of avid young potters!

Each progressive activity is laid out as a lesson plan, illustrated with photographs of the different steps involved, right through to finished items shown with their creators. Variations on the original theme are carefully explained and illustrated.

Between pages 6 and 28, there is an easily read, consecutive exposition under the heading, *Your First Pottery Session*, which outlines all the basic techniques and skills required such as cutting the clay, making a ball and pinch pot. This continues in *Lesson Two - Coil Pots* with a section on coiling the clay and a number of variations.

From page 29 to page 58 detailed instruction is given for the design and management of seven specific clay sculpture projects which progress in complexity as the skills of the pupils develop. The ending on pages 59 and 60 suggests that, as pupils like to show off their work, a small exhibition is in order. Finally the author advises the reader to use the book "as a place to begin. Don't be afraid to get clay on it!"

On the cover, the book is described "as a practical handbook, which can be used by a teacher, parent or helper as a guide for introducing the creative use of clay to children with special needs. It is suitable for children whose level of learning difficulty is mild to moderate." It is further described as "entirely suitable for all children in primary school..." The reviewer would agree in part with the first statement but little with the second. The project, as carried out with teenage pupils with moderate learning disability, has much to recommend it. Other teachers working with similar groups of pupils would find this book to be both instructive and supportive - provided they were as enthusiastic as the author and colleague and had a reasonable degree of organisational and creative skill.

However, any approach to using clay with younger children - whether with special needs or not - would also need to take account of the need for younger and immature children, when first given clay in the classroom, to have the opportunity to explore the material in its own right - often just as a play medium. In the introduction to *Creative Clay Craft* (sadly long out of print), Ernst Röttger says, "The meaning of the game does not lie in the functional use of what is produced but in the play itself..." and "Anybody who in play succeeds in learning the characteristics of the material and in gaining creative experience will then be able to give significant form to functional objects..."

With just that one caveat, the reviewer strongly recommends that copies of "Clay Days" should be in every special school staffroom, in special class settings and in training facilities for young adults with learning disabilities.

This book is not just for reading - it is for using as a workroom reference and resource, spiral bound and with hard glossy pages - "Don't be afraid to get clay on it!"

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**CLAY DAYS: THE CREATIVE USE OF CLAY WITH SPECIAL CHILDREN** by Anne Heffernan, is published by Wexford Arts Centre, Cornmarket, Wexford and costs Ir£8.50 including p&p. It is available from the Wexford Arts Centre or from most major bookshops.

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