

The Process: Raw Clay to Finished Product – Teacher Tips



This lump of clay was brought in from the playground by a student. It is a great example of clay before it has been conditioned, the impurities taken out. Here in Houston, Texas, where I taught, the ground is mainly composed of what it called gumbo. It is a form of clay. It expands when wet, and shrinks when it dries. These bags of clay weight 50 pounds each, impurities have been removed.



This pile of broken bisque fired clay I saved from year to year to pour out of a bag to make a point. I wanted students to understand what a work of overworked clay looks like after it blows up in a kiln, and how it can blow up other work around it as well. It was too much of a temptation for students who were new to clay, and not satisfied with their initial product to smash it up and start over instead of shaping, smoothing and working with what they had already made. The option of not firing is brought up later.



Another essential for clay instruction is to have plenty of examples on hand. I saved examples from each stage of the process for each lesson including examples of how to make lesson simpler or to make it more challenging. I kept examples in labeled shoe boxes. They were organized by subject and level of difficulty (grade level). When I taught, I found skill to be more an indication of exposure and practice, and much less to do with grade level.



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These photos are examples of some of the items I saved in those labeled shoe boxes.



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This cart held everything I needed to teach clay; tools, boards, plastic bags, clay, and containers to collect work in. The cart was left set up and ready to roll out into the room with little effort. Simple clay "tools" (plastic utensils, and dried out ink pens) can be put in containers for easy distribution.



This rolling table was invaluable for younger students, like Kindergarten and some 1st grade classes (depending on skill level and self-control). Four to eight students can be called up at a time to work under closer supervision. The rest of the students work on artwork at their seats. I would choose an art related assignment that didn't require quite as much assistance. There are many skills that need repeated practice that can be done more independently.

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This is a teacher sampler. Before starting clay each year with my students, I practiced myself so I could remember the pitfalls to avoid, and all the things that would be helpful to teach in order for my students to have a successful outcome.

Most of the time, I also had each group practice in modeling (practice) clay what they were going to make in regular clay. That would give me a chance to get around the whole room to make sure everyone understood the techniques being taught. The following class we would work with the regular clay. Practice makes better.



These photos are of the shelves in the Kiln “clay” room. I chose to do clay with all grade levels at the same time, so you can see the shelves are labeled by grade level. Students wanting their work fired, had to carve their name and team into the bottom of their work in a legible manner. At the end of each class, I checked and collected the work then put it on the shelves to dry.

I did not insist that everyone fire their work. If a student would rather take the clay home, I supplied clear “ziplock” bags with instructions of “How to Reuse Clay”. Students liked having this choice. Student’s first experience with clay can be frustrating because of the limited time allowed to get the desired result. The option of taking the clay home to practice some more took the frustration out of working with clay.

Another advantage of the “take the clay home” option was overworked clay was taken home instead of risking it blowing up in the kiln and taking more carefully worked pieces with it.

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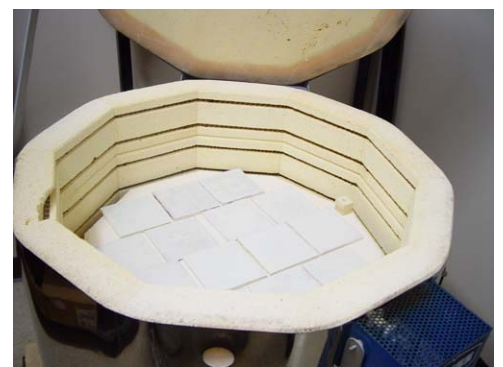
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Teaching thousands of students at a school with a high turn over rate taught me the value of a well worded and placed sign. I wanted my students to learn as much as they possibly could in the short time I got to work with them. I didn't have time to take them all in the clay room, but they could see in and see the sign, and begin to build their art vocabulary. I considered all the walls as instructional space.



This is the inside of a kiln being loaded for firing. The shelves are built up as the kiln is being loaded. Bisque pieces can be set inside one another, if they are very dry and you are certain there are no air bubbles. Work that is glazed needs to be "not touching" and the glaze needs to not touch the shelf or it may become permanently affixed to it. Stilts may need to be used.



Safety was always on my mind when it came to firing the kiln. No flammable materials stored in the kiln room especially when in use. Main power (circuit breaker) off when not in use. Only fire kiln when present in the building. Make sure the fan is on during the whole firing process so fumes will not enter the classroom. Use the built in timer. Keep the door to the kiln room closed and locked when firing. When done, double check to make sure everything is turned off.



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