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**Because Clay has a Memory:
Conversations about Dyslexia, Ceramics and
Success**

Constant Albertson

**A Thesis
in
The Department of Art Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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Abstract

Because Clay has a Memory: Conversations about dyslexia, ceramics and success

**Constant Albertson
Concordia University, 2001**

A qualitative interview methodology that retells the life stories of seven highly successful dyslexic ceramic artists is used in this thesis to explore relationships between compensating for the learning disability dyslexia and career choice for seven highly successful dyslexic ceramists. Disturbed by the apparently random nature of educational interventions and by the attitudes of many experts towards children with learning disabilities, I intend to bring into better focus why some dyslexics have succeeded and what might be done to support dyslexic compensation.

I argue both that most students, not only those with learning disabilities, are under-served by the current structure and offerings in public schools and that appropriate teaching practice for dyslexics is good for all students. Three major factors emerged in dyslexic compensation: 1. The caring support and guidance of adults, both teachers and parents who promote 'authentic' success, 2. the value of good teaching practice with an emphasis on problem-finding, multi-sensory and contextualized knowledge, and 3. the learner's passionate interest in a field tolerant of learning differences that at the lower levels is both accessible to those with reading difficulties, but also offers important opportunities for expression and exploration of thought and feeling, and the meaning of experience.

For the artists who participated in this study, ceramics was the field that offered, at all levels of study and practice, important opportunities for authentic success, while also gradually demanding improved research skills. The artists' interest in ceramics supported, guided and encouraged their reading practice. The more they learned from their practical experience of ceramics, the more they were able to learn from texts because of a slow build up of contextualized vocabulary and content knowledge.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to my mother, Johnnie L. Albertson, who believed, and to Mrs. Tory, who taught me how to read, and to Liz Soroka, who did the same for my son.

Seven artists graciously and courageously invited me into their lives and, with profound candor, intelligence and humor, shared their stories and insights.

Thank you, Alan Bennett, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz, Randy Schmidt, Michael Sherrill, and Greg Wenz. I am deeply honored by the gift you have made of your stories and your experience. George Bernard Shaw wrote: *Art is the only teacher, except torture.* Having known both, you are living proof that art is by far the superior teacher.

I have learned from the artists who shared their stories with me that for some learning in school is a feat of courage, a triumph of hope over experience. I would like to thank my dissertation committee who taught by example that the linchpin in this structure of teaching and learning is mutual respect and trust:

My thesis advisor, Dr. David Pariser, showed me when to instruct and when to teach by refraining from instructing, signaling a respect and faith in my ingenuity. When we began, I would not have known how to ask for this, nor how important his confidence would be to me. I am grateful for both the space and support, and promise to pass it on.

Fledgling ideas are easily trampled and killed; Dr Elizabeth Sacca trod very lightly on my early 'zero' drafts. She also taught me to trust and to follow the stories in others and in me.

My first course at Concordia University was taught by Dr. Robert Parker, who helped me to sort my interests. Always ready with a name, phone number, practical advice, or a much-needed joke, his encouragement from Ice Storm to cover page has been a calming voice of reason.

I especially thank Dr. Miriam Davidson, Indiana University; Dr. Barbara Mowat, the Folger Library; and Dr. Eve Spangler, Boston College, who read the edited transcripts and provided valuable feedback concerning the veracity of my interpretations.

Finally, I would like to thank my patient family, my husband, John, and our two children, Sarah and Blake. I also thank Brigitte Bedard, who babysat and rabbit-sat for the better part of eight years, so that I could return to school, teach, conduct interviews, write, steam, stew, ponder and percolate.

I could not have done this without you.

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner.... It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numerals around the face, but descriptions of where each family member might be. 'Home,' 'school,' and 'work' were there, but there was also 'traveling,' 'lost,' 'hospital,' 'prison,' and, in the position where the number twelve would be on the normal clock, 'mortal peril.'

Rowling, J.K. (2000) *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. NY: Scholastic, 151.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Backwards and wearing heels

There is a story attributed to Ginger Rogers, commenting on the relative attention paid to her famous dance partner in which she quips, *I did everything he did, only backwards and wearing heels*. The stories of successful and compensated dyslexics are similar in that the point is only partially that she danced well despite this handicap; the real marvel is that she danced so beautifully that the audience was unaware of the difficulty of the task.

Often the talents of people with learning disabilities are developed as coping mechanisms. What the general public tends not to recognize is how many things the learning disabled have to do consciously. Most people don't have to think about screening out noise or to devise methods to focus their attention on what's being said. They don't continually have to invent ways to remember things, and they don't explicitly have to organize everything that they do.... They don't have to rely on landmarks to find their way around. They don't have to think about how not to bump into a wall, knock everything off their desks, or spill the coffee. Most people simply do these things. (Smith, 1992, p. 65)

In this thesis, I explore relationships between compensating for the learning disability dyslexia and career choice for seven successful dyslexic ceramic artists. Inevitably interwoven with these stories are counterpoints constructed from my experience as a compensated dyslexic ceramist and mother of a young dyslexic child. These counterpoints serve three purposes which link together the past and present relevance of my broad themes: dyslexia, art-making and compensation. 1. My own perspective in this research is available for questioning. 2. The past and present experiences illustrate material presented in the Literature Review. 3. Most importantly, these stories suggest

that the experiences of the adult dyslexics portrayed are not relics of a distant educational past, but on-going problems for a child today.

For this dissertation, I utilize 'storytelling,' collecting and retelling life histories as a methodology. I use the words 'story', 'narrative' and 'account' interchangeably to mean the sequencing of a series of events for the purpose of illuminating a point. Although the events in these accounts may have been selected because of symbolic value, the events are also literally true. The usual association of story with entertainment is not my primary intention, although certainly there were aesthetic considerations to the arrangement of the events.

Most importantly, my employment of narrative portraits attempts to redress the tendency towards facelessness and over-generalization that often mars the literature on learning disabilities. The people whose stories I tell are not 'them's' or 'these people'; they are each complex, struggling, productive and dignified human beings, individuals. Yet these individuals take their places within a larger pattern suggestive of far-ranging consequences and implications. Because of this, I use this storytelling as a way of integrating their experience, finding pattern and meaning in what might otherwise be a chaotic mess of disconnected facts. Thunder-McGuire (1999) writes that collecting our stories provides a direction, an integrating understanding of the meanings to be found in experience.

... The composition of stories can propose to the writer or teller questions and serve as a framework for synthesizing their knowledge...Telling stories is the practice of unraveling the connections and direction to human action. It involves recovering meaning by putting events and experiences into a story.... The integrating function of oral history and autobiography allow the teller to bring about, beyond the grasping together of incidents, a mediation between 'what happened' and the 'meaning of what happened' (p. 10-11).

Beyond celebrating accomplishment under unfavorable circumstances, I emphasize the importance in the lives of these successful learners of an arts education, particularly ceramics, and general 'good' teaching practice with an emphasis on "problem-finding" (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976). I include the educational dimension because I am convinced that dyslexics are the mining canaries of the school system. Educational circumstances that favor dyslexics are also healthier for non-dyslexics. That these dyslexic learners are successful despite, *or even because of*, their learning differences presents intriguing perspectives from which to view the care and guidance of any young person struggling to learn, to communicate and to contribute. I am convinced that the most significant factor in dyslexic accomplishment is not a string of typical dyslexic strengths (West, 1991; Swaywitz, 1996), but rather an interest that becomes a passion. Hugh Newell Jacobsen, a renowned architect who is dyslexic, gave this advice to dyslexic students:

It may come late to you, but the cry is to find something that you really love to do. I did about the only thing I really loved to do; it all came out of drawing and imagining what was inside a drawing (Smith, 1992, p. 61).

Special interests can become a life's work and a passionate interest boils down to motivation. When learning is its own reward, motivation is self-sustaining. Important for any child, intrinsic motivation is especially important for a child who struggles with dyslexia. Yet this intrinsic motivation requires effective leadership and guidance from empathetic, knowledgeable parents and teachers who care enough to get to know the child well in order to present learning in ways that are both accessible and exciting. This is not news, but it happens less frequently

than it should.

My wish to explore the relationships among success, compensation for dyslexia and career choice for these individuals is the result of my own experience as a parent of a dyslexic child and as a compensated dyslexic ceramist. I have always believed that my early and passionate love for making art played a large part in the process of compensation for me. Dyslexia is a permanent state, intrinsic to my neurological make up, and therefore I am considered dyslexic¹. Having compensated, however, my literacy makes me undetectable under normal circumstances, placing me in a unique position for articulating this problem from the inside out.

Several years ago, I began noticing that many of my students and colleagues were also dyslexic. Because students, especially, are often very perceptive about their teachers' weaknesses, I poke fun at my remaining dyslexic tendencies. However, an answering choruses of "Me too!" would begin an exchange of stories and information. I was amazed that our early educational experiences had been so similar. I had always thought that there were very few dyslexics and that my own experiences were unique. It, also, struck me as interesting that so many had a comparable passion for the ceramic arts, and thought, without hyperbole, of the field and their on-going fascination with

¹ In that 'dyslexics' may have an atypical brain structure, dyslexia is a life-long condition. However from a performance point of view, the cognitive symptoms of dyslexia may disappear altogether. Lyytinen (1997) found that a small number of adult 'dyslexics' (fully-compensated dyslexics) perform equally in both speed and accuracy to the control group in the reading tasks tested. "The identification of compensatory processes encourages us in our belief that dyslexia may not necessarily be a life-long disorder and that early identification may help overcome it (Lyytinen, 1997, p. 106).

ceramics as a life-preserver. One severely dyslexic man told me, "Clay completes me." By this, I think he meant that clay gives him a language, a voice, and records the memory of that voice for others to know who he was and what he thought².

As I stated earlier, my emphasis in this thesis is on the resilience of a particular group of learners who have escaped the downward spiral of failure so typical of dyslexics that it appears to be a perverse birthright. This small, particular group has managed to succeed, not only in compensating for their dyslexia, but also in their chosen careers in the ceramic arts by invoking, perhaps ironically, their intact and formidable hunger to learn. In part, I shall re-trace a particular route in a journey of success by telling the stories of these seven dyslexic ceramists. And in part, I shall search for under-charted courses that might someday yield a better way to guide not only young dyslexics, but any child under-served under the present conditions.

Although all of the dyslexic individuals discussed herein encountered hurtful, negative educational circumstances, I do recognize that teachers are poorly supported in their duty towards many children, all of whom have diverse needs and abilities. It is, therefore, not my intention to disparage all classroom teachers, but rather to point out how entrenched are the problems with divergent

²In his book, *Stories of Resilience in Childhood*, Daniel Challener (1997) makes a very strong point about the importance of finding a voice and being able to articulate your own distinguishing characteristics: "...Each child struggled to escape being silenced...us[ing] words ...to establish an identity that was acceptable to themselves and break away from an identity that others had tried to impose upon them.... Finding a voice (and in the larger sense, establishing an identity) is much of what growing up is all about", p. 10.

learners in schools. This thesis does not, however, probe the complex and multi-layered organizational structure of schools, nor the political, social and economic values reflected therein, but rather accepts it as a fact that some learners are under-served under the present conditions.

Dyslexic children's experiences are similar, today and in the past

I have included two descriptions of my young son's experiences in elementary schools at the beginning and at the end of this thesis because his experience affirms the continuing relevance of the depictions of school life described both in the literature review and by the adult dyslexics interviewed. The first part of my son's story portrays his and my growing awareness that there was a problem with his learning in school, and the difficulties encountered finding the help he needed. In the conclusion of this thesis, I continue the story with descriptions of the help we found, and the importance of excellent teaching and excitement in learning.

My son's story:

When he was five, our bright, inventive son was building a pirate ship more or less from a Lego kit containing building blocks, pirate figures, a gold chest, a skeleton to guard the treasure and pictograph instructions. After patiently assembling the tiny building blocks into a ship, he noticed that the kit did not contain a telescope and that he could not begin his game without a way to scan the horizon. So he removed the head of a skeleton figure and placed his pirate so that it could peer down the neck bone of the skeleton. He called out to me, grinning slyly, "Look, Mom, I've made a *SKEL-e-scope!*" Our son had made

up for a slow-ish start in talking with an intriguing interest in word play. He delighted in puns, designed complex and fanciful Lego machines, and sang long Country Western ballads to anyone who would listen. Yet at the beginning of the second grade, he still could not read, nor could he reliably write his name or recite the alphabet. When attempting to write vocabulary words, his n's and w's stood on their heads to become u's or m's; p's, b's and d's were interchangeable; f's were t's and q's were g's. His pen and ink drawings showed imagination, control, dexterity and detail, but his handwriting set off a gnawing worry in me. Suddenly, our sweet, cheerful little boy was involved in playground fights, had mood swings, crying jags, fearfulness, nightmares and temper tantrums.

It was a long period of time, one that required extraordinary parental pressure, before a variety of primary and secondary tests were conducted. These tests indicated a typical pattern of strengths and weaknesses in which the Verbal scores were significantly greater than the Performance, scores swinging wildly from "below average to superior." Test results indicated lower scores on tests of rote memory, both visual and auditory. These scores were averaged together to place his overall global intellectual functioning well above average. The report concluded that "given his intellectual ability and his delays in acquisition of basic reading and written expression that he may have a specific learning disability....," naming his disability, dyslexia.

Tests completed, I wrongly assumed that identifying the problem was a significant step to setting in motion appropriate teaching and learning strategies. The school board had no specific guidelines for educational support and

intervention for children with dyslexia. Although allowing for flexibility, this left the classroom and resource teachers isolated and unsupported to invent appropriate strategies. Because these teachers were uninformed about learning disabilities, strategies were never formulated, and therefore never implemented.

Behavioral problems grew worse as our son's school performance continued to deteriorate. Therefore, I bought books on phonics, drawing pictures for my son as we sounded out the letters. The vowel "a" yielded a drawing of an angry ape, short and long vowel sounds. He would giggle and want to give the ape an apple. He enjoyed these drawing / phonics sessions; more to the point, he remembered the lesson. Improvement on all counts was swift and sure, and his attitude towards school changed. I knew we were on the right track, but realized that we needed to find someone who knew more than the school's staff or I did.

Eventually we found a private tutor with an extensive special education background and a passion for teaching. She was warm and playful, enjoying the company of young children. In addition to the solid remedial work utilizing phonics with pictures, reading practice and memory games, she distributed praise and treats generously, making sure that he was aware of every improvement. Taking small amounts of time to chat with his sister or lend her a book, the tutor effectively re-routed sibling rivalry into protectiveness and cooperation. Our son responded to all this support by redoubling his effort, aware but never complaining that other children do not have to work as hard.

In addition, we transferred our son to an 'English' school, which in Quebec means that half of the content is in English and half in French. We believed at the time that this switch in combination with the extra tutoring would improve his ability to succeed in the classroom, increasing his confidence. We also knew that the class size would increase dramatically in the old school and hoped for a better teacher to pupil ratio in the new school. We had to make our decision about transferring before the new principal would have the final numbers for the class.

Initially, the transfer worked against some of the gains made by the tutor in terms of our son's confidence and happiness. Peer interaction, teacher attitudes and class size in the new school were more negative than we expected. As the new kid in school, our son found it difficult to make new friends and often felt lonely and alienated. His new homeroom teacher was fond of 'pop' quizzes, spelling bees, and children "taking responsibility for their own learning." This meant rote memorization and little help with organization. Perhaps these are useful demands for many children, but they were unhelpful for our son.

In a parent/teacher's meeting, his other teacher described our eight-year-old son as "lazy", "immature" and "stubborn" because he was easily distracted, slouched in his chair and did not work well in groups. Both teachers complained that instead of paying attention in class, he often hid a book in other books and read when he should have been attending to his work. They pointed out that when it served him he was capable of great care, organization and detail. When he paid attention, he could do the other work easily and that his major strengths

were his ability to articulate and reason logically. They, therefore, just did not understand what the talk of a disability was all about.

These teachers' attitudes highlight a significant problem with dyslexic children. The general inconsistency in their performance, which is the major hallmark of the disability, is difficult to understand and likely to be attributed to character failings. There is no reason to assume that a dyslexic is any less capable of sophisticated abstract thinking, yet it is very likely that the dyslexic will have difficulty articulating his or her thoughts on paper. Some teachers interpret this sort of behavior as educational refusal and become personally offended and disproportionately annoyed with the child. Not without reason, both teachers expressed to me their high frustration and impatience with our son, but I am certain that our son and his classmates were also aware of their attitudes.

Review of Literature:

My son's school experiences portrayed in this account suggest important themes that I pursue in the literature review. These themes emerged not only in my son's life, but also very strongly in the lives of the dyslexic artists who shared their experiences with me. These themes involve the 1. Characteristics and consequences of dyslexia, 2. Parental roles, 3. Good teaching as opposed to bad (or unhelpful) teaching, 4. Implications and recommendations for teaching.

The themes described above arose from questions that emerged as a result of my son's and my experiences. These questions began very simply, but became far more complex: "What is dyslexia and what do I do about it?" became "Why is the classroom particularly problematic for dyslexics?" "Why do dyslexics

seem to attract so much negative attention?” “Why are dyslexics frustrating to classroom teachers?” and “What helps a dyslexic child learn?” As I learned more, I wanted to know why there are so many dyslexic artists and what were the relationships between the visual arts and dyslexia. Ultimately, the question became, “How do dyslexics succeed in life?”

What is Dyslexia? Confusing Definitions

Definitions of dyslexia change according to which aspects of the reading disability the researcher attends. There is enormous debate in the literature about almost every aspect of dyslexia from basic definitions to what causes it and how to improve the situation. Dyslexia appears the perfect ground to wage Nature verses Nurture debates on whether dyslexia is an intrinsic neurological condition (Smith, 1991; Edwards, 1994; Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987; Geschwind, 1987; Shaywitz, 1996, Silver, 1989; West, 1991; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991) or a condition induced by confusion to inappropriate instruction (Smith, 1985; Shahl, 1997). There is even an intriguing combination argument in which dyslexia exists in the interaction of the two, an intrinsic, biologically-based phonological processing deficit *in combination* with both weaknesses in the teaching of reading skills and the culture in which the individual lives (Frith, 1997; Hatcher, et al, 1994).

Phonological structure and the phonological awareness of a language refer to the smallest units of a language, an individual's ability to identify individual sounds and to divide a whole word into its constituent parts sequentially (Lindamood, Bell & Lindamood, 1997). “Phonological skills, a child's

awareness of the sound structure of spoken words, and the ability to manipulate those structures—appear to be an important predictor of learning to read...”

(Goswami, 1997, p.131). It is certain that teaching practice, the phonological and grammatical structure of the language and parent-child interaction play a large role not only in how the basic disability manifests itself but also in the process of compensation (Snowling, 1996; Snowling & Nation, 1997; Lyythinen, 1997, Goswami, 1997).

Behavioral definition:

At least part of the confusion in understanding what dyslexia is seems to stem from definitions that rely solely on qualitatively judged patterns of behaviors, many of which can be observed to lesser degrees in non-dyslexics, rather than quantifiably measured qualities that are exclusive to dyslexics. These behaviors include difficulty in learning how to read, left/right confusion, difficulty saying long words, difficulty recalling digits, adding and subtracting, longer confusion with letters like ‘b’ and ‘d’ (Miles, 1995) in the presence of exclusionary characteristics, like adequate intelligence, physical and emotional health, and educational opportunities (Edwards, 1994; Fink, 1998; Long, et al, 1994; Shaywitz, 1989).

Additional confusion is added to behavioral definitions by the fact that few dyslexics suffer from all possible symptoms, or conversely areas of weakness for some dyslexics may prove areas of significant strength for others. Other weaknesses may, or may not, include any combination of the following: difficulty with handwriting, spelling, arithmetic, foreign languages, rote memory, physical

coordination, general organizational skills, delayed speech development, indifference to time and schedules, excessive daydreaming, and/or social ineptness (Shaywitz, 1989; Edwards, 1994; Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987; West, 1991; Smith, 1991; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991).

Cognitive definition:

However useful the behavioral definitions are to identifying dyslexic problems, they do not adequately answer the question of what dyslexia is, or is not. Cognitive definitions rely on theoretical assumptions about the underlying cognitive deficiencies, such as deficits in short term memory or accessing long-term memory (Riddick, 1996), but do not explain the significant areas of strength described by many researchers. Shaywitz (1996) describes an unusual constellation of cognitive strengths and *unexpected* weaknesses in otherwise physically healthy people with normal to superior intelligence, resulting in difficulties learning to read and write. Swaywitz (1996) defines dyslexia as

... an encapsulated deficit often surrounded by significant strengths in reasoning, problem-solving, concept formation, critical thinking and vocabulary. (p. 104)

A strong indication of dyslexia involves peculiar discrepancies on cognitive tests. Dyslexic children classically perform dramatically unevenly on WISC tests, for example. Most people perform within a predictable range across competencies measured by these IQ tests (Gardner, 1993a). However a graph of a dyslexic child's scores would look like a mountain range with steep peaks and valleys. When these scores are averaged together, a number is generated that yields a skewed and misleading view of the child's global intelligence, or IQ

(Butkowsky & Willows, 1980). While an average IQ under these circumstances is useful in signaling that further investigation is required to discover why the child is not learning specific material as expected, the flattened out numbers for strengths and weaknesses render the IQ number useless in helping teachers find the strengths that could help a child compensate for weaknesses (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Gardner, 1993a).

Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences provides a variety of interesting perspectives from which dyslexia can be understood.

Special educators have, for many years, known that students who have difficulty learning in traditional classrooms have gifts and talents that often surpass their more average peers. Yet these children were being labeled, and often treated, as less than average intellectually. Gardner's work has begun to change this (Long, Austin & Bowen, 1994a, p. 45).

In Gardner's (1993a) Theory of Multiple Intelligences "intelligences" are defined as the problem-solving skills that "allow one to approach a situation in which a goal is to be obtained and to locate the appropriate route to that goal" (p. 15). Practically speaking, if a child's many intelligences can be identified, then his or her talents will not be overlooked and useful interventions could be planned to strengthen weaknesses.

Neurological definitions:

Neurological definitions cite differences in dyslexic brain organization that explain patterns of strengths, weaknesses and individual variation. Shaywitz (1996) theorizes that dyslexia is a malfunction of one of the lower modes of processing information that goes on in the brain. The higher orders of processing involve semantics, syntax and discourse, while the lowest order

involves the breakdown in the processing of the phonological elements, the sounds that make up the language (Shaywitz, 1996).

Much progress has been made recently in the fields of genetics and neurology identifying anatomical differences that may play a part in the development of dyslexia. Differences have been discovered on chromosomes 15, 1 and 6 in many families with histories of dyslexia (DeFries et al, 1997; Candor et al, 1994; Tucker, 1997). It is thought that aspects of phonological processing, rather than the dyslexia directly, are inheritable. This 'inheritance' in combination with other factors predisposes an individual to be dyslexic (Tucker, 1997).

Neurologists have found differences in brain structure as well. Autopsies of dyslexics have revealed an unusual left and right hemispheric symmetry³ indicating an excess of language-related cortex or an unusual reversal of asymmetry with a larger right hemisphere (Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987; Galaburda, 1989). This extra brain tissue and the unusual connections between parts lead Geschwind and Galaburda (1987) to speculate that an essential 'pruning' process of excess brain cells, normally occurring during the fifth to seventh months of gestation (Hynd & Hiernenz, 1997), fails to occur in dyslexic individuals. These extra cells may interfere with efficient brain function (Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987). This ultimately results in a mixed dominance in handedness and language lateralization of the brain that may, at least in part, be responsible for language processing deficits (Galaburda, 1989). In addition,

³ Non-dyslexics generally have brains with a larger left and smaller right hemispheres.

other anomalies also found in non-dyslexic brains, such as “focal dysplasias, ectopias, brain warts, etc” (Hynd, 1997, p. 47) may play a role in an individual's risk for developing dyslexia. It may be that the atypical asymmetry complicates or interferes with an individual's ability to compensate for these cortical anomalies, or visa versa.

It is important to notice that none of the researchers claim to have discovered the root cause of dyslexia, nor even claim that anatomy is the overriding factor, but rather that certain factors may predispose individuals to have difficulties with certain cognitive tasks:

If there is an abnormality at the neurological level in a specific brain system, then an abnormality in the mental processes subserved by this system would be expected. Of course, such a consequence is not inevitable: there may be protective factors. Also there may be sufficient redundancy in the system to avert any further cognitive consequences. We are not talking about a deterministic cause, only a probabilistic one. Let us assume, however, that at least in certain cases, the neurological abnormality causes a weakness in a cognitive component of the phonological system. (Frith, et al, 1997, p. 6)

Imaging technology is beginning to address the interaction of behavior and biology. Cognitive neurologists are now able to view what occurs in the brain while people perform various activities. A study by Paulesu et al. (1996) indicated that even completely compensated dyslexics show abnormal brain activity when performing phonological processing activities, such as rhyme judgment and memory tasks. Even when the speed and accuracy of the tasks was equal between the dyslexics and the control group, the dyslexics utilized different parts of their brains to accomplish the activities. Parts of the brain associated with phonological processing (in the left hemisphere) were under-

utilized while the parts of the brain associated with speech (in the right hemisphere) were far more active than average. This is suggestive that even when the behavior is remediated, the brain continues to function in divergent ways. In addition, the exact nature of the relationships between spoken and written language impairments is, at present, unknown and apparently changes within an individual over time (Snowling & Nation, 1997).

Implications of the definitions for education:

This is not a definitive review of the literature on the possible behavioral, cognitive or neurological bases of dyslexia. My intended point is that dyslexia is a physiologically-based and complex condition which is unrelated to intelligence. Although much progress has been made in identifying likely factors, there does not appear to be any, one, essential cause. Rather, there is a fluid interaction of many circumstances. Although there are certainly negative consequences for individual dyslexics, it is also possible that dyslexia results from a normal variation of human brain development that might also have positive consequences (Shaywitz, 1989; West, 1991).

This also implies that exclusionary definitions are less useful than previously thought. If there is a discrete cluster of neurological differences that interferes with an individual's ability to learn how to read, then these factors could occur concurrently with other problems, masking or complicating the dyslexia. In other words, a person may have other reasons to be a poor reader, other learning disabilities, economical or educational deprivation, poor general health, hearing or eyesight and, even, low intelligence, and still also be dyslexic. It is

important that dyslexia not be ignored because of more obvious problems, but it is equally important that educators not make premature assumptions about an individual's limitations.

Although dyslexia can be simply defined as a phonological processing deficit, which results in difficulty learning to read, the consequences touch on every aspect of an individual's life. Generation of a definition of dyslexia is difficult in part because of the complexity of relationships between the biology of the brain and the surrounding environment. In addition, every dyslexic has a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses that interact in positive and negative ways. Definitions are further complicated by the difficulty of distinguishing how much inconsistency is problematic. Gardner (1989) found that it is not unusual for non-dyslexics to perform inconsistently across the various 'intelligences' or competencies studied. "... We discovered less synchrony across areas" (Gardner, 1989, p. 73). From this perspective, dyslexia is an extreme example of something that occurs in almost everyone. This further reinforces the contention that biology is not destiny.

Identifying and developing a dyslexic person's strengths, and marshalling them to offset the effects of discouragement in order to develop compensatory strategies, provides hope, control and motivation. Definitions, therefore, must be multi-faceted and carefully constructed. The most useful layman's definition that I found, which I use for this research, is derived from a booklet published by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (1991):

**... a neurological inefficiency that affects a particular area of intellectual function (e.g., attention, perception, memory) and / or that impedes acquisition or learning of specific information at an average speed....
(Learning Disability Association, 1991, p. 3)**

The terms “particular”, “specific” and “inefficiency” are key to this definition.

Individuals with this learning disability are able to reason and learn, may even be talented in several areas; but in their area(s) of weakness, they are inefficient.

However, the psychological consequences from typical experiences of repeated failure may make it difficult for the individual to persevere. This places the emphasis squarely on the potential role of education not merely to treat, correct and/or speed up processing of particular kinds of information, but to provide the children with opportunities to succeed.

I must re-emphasize here that this is not an easy task. Much of the frustration in guiding dyslexic children is related to a jagged cognitive profile in which considerable strengths and weaknesses mix. Even with a good understanding of possible dyslexic difficulties, it is embarrassingly easy to misinterpret, or judge too harshly, a child's behavior. A dyslexic child may have poor kinetic / spatial ability. It is easy to interpret clumsiness as clownishness, destructiveness, or even aggressiveness. The child's oral speech may be logical and well-organized, indicating an excellent vocabulary, grasp of concepts and relationships, but the same child's written work is an impenetrable garble of misformed words and thoughts. S/he might have an excellent memory for baseball biographies or song lyrics, but cannot, or is it *will* not?, remember the seven times table, days of the week, or dental appointments. Exhaustion from the greater effort required or difficulty deciding where to start on a project can appear

to be laziness. A messy desk, untidy room, unkempt appearance, or a lost glove may really reflect deficits in organizational skills, but the child is scolded for carelessness.

A dyslexic child may even intentionally contribute to the confusion by diverting attention away from a mistake by making a joke: a misread word, a transposed bus number or a slip on the carpet are transformed into a comedy routine. This may not, initially, be a deliberate attempt to disrupt a class lesson or ridicule an adult, but rather an attempt to hide embarrassment or to make friends. Add to this the effects of psychological scarring from the negative attention dyslexic children often attract, the resulting behavior problems, and the whole tangled mess becomes overwhelming. When frustration and rage mount, sometimes a facile wit and tongue do become deliberately cruel and bullying; when effort is rarely rewarded, sometimes a child will become lazy. The question then becomes, who understands the child well enough to recognize the difference, and relationships, between *cannot* and *will not*? Who will advocate for answers to the questions, “Why is this child not thriving in school?” and “What do we do about it?”

Parental roles

Conflict between the home and the school:

Between 10% (Geschwind, 1985; Sullivan, 1996) and 20% (West, 1990; Swaywitz, 1996; Edwards, 1994) of all school children are dyslexic. That means that in every Quebec classroom, there are between 3 and 5 children with this problem alone. Unless they have someone in their lives who is able and willing

to advocate for them, dyslexic children will not likely receive the help they need to succeed.

Many dyslexic children have dyslexic parents (Edwards, 1994; Riddick, 1996, Lyythinen, 1997). These parents may have painful memories of their own education and their children's struggles tend to reopen old wounds. Already distrustful of any educational institution and emotionally exhausted from coping with a vast array of related problems (behavior, family dynamics, additional educational expenses, etc.), they may also be intimidated by teachers, principals and the bureaucracy surrounding schools (Edwards, 1994). Contact and communication with educational authorities is often further hampered by poor organizational and writing skills on the one hand, and insensitive, evasive administration on the other (Edwards, 1994). Teachers and principals often see frustrated, overly-protective parents (Edwards, 1994; Riddick, 1996). Parents, usually mothers (Riddick, 1996; McKennell, 1997), are wrong no matter what they do:

... Because many...[educational administrations] do not recognize dyslexia, it is only by parents taking the initiative to have their children assessed outside of the formal educational system that their children are identified. But again critics would claim that such parents are pushy, neurotic and over ambitious.... (Riddick, 1996, p. 52)

Parents see experts who seem incompetent and defensively blame them for their child's problems or label their child lazy despite obvious signs of effort.

Consequently all the individuals guiding the child's development may not have the same information and work at cross-purposes.

Psychological consequences:

Young dyslexics typically suffer unjust and inhumane treatment during their early education, and this often has devastating life-long implications (Riddick, 1996; Gilchrist, 1997). Edwards (1994) sums up the problem:

... All dyslexics can expect to suffer from inadequate help and neglect, undergo humiliations and be teased or persecuted within the present school system. As a direct result of this, they lack confidence, doubt their intellectual ability and develop behavioral problems.... Other painful experiences such as being the victim of violence or unfairness affected the majority of students [in her study]. (p. 116)

Gilchrist (1997), Edwards (1994), Ziminsky (1993), and Smith (1991) add to this list of symptoms of psychological scarring associated with dyslexia: depression, cynicism, isolation and difficulty forming and maintaining intimate relationships, truancy, psychosomatic illness, depression, nervous breakdowns, criminal behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, traffic fatalities and suicide. Sullivan et al. (1996) add disproportional rates of sexually-transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancy. A study by Osmond and Morrison (1992) found that 42% of inmates in the British jails studied had low literacy rates; further investigation yielded a high percentage of those testing with untreated learning disabilities.

Some of the researchers suggest that because of sequencing difficulties, dyslexic individuals *intrinsically* cannot appreciate cause and effect (Sullivan et al. 1996; Thompson, 1997b; Smith, 1991).

It seems logical to assume that the dyslexic, with poor sequencing skills and with established difficulties in verbalizing their [sic] thought processes, does not work out in advance the simple practicalities of cause and effect.... They will almost inevitably create trouble for themselves at school and at home by acting without envisaging the consequences or even recognizing the direct link between what they have done and the reaction of adults or their peers (Thompson, 1997b, p. 248).

Multiple contributing factors:

It may be that sequencing difficulties exacerbate counterproductive behavior; however difficulties with expression, and the frustration this causes, may play a far greater role than is generally acknowledged. Indeed, the often noted 'intrinsic' impulsiveness (Smith, 1991; Sullivan, 1996) interpretation for this behavior being directly linked to learning disabilities does not take into account the devastating effects of repeated failure, frustration and humiliation.

No doubt, there are multiple contributing factors for behavior and social problems, but the assumption that intrinsic neurological deficiencies are the primary cause of these problems conveniently excuses those individuals and institutions responsible for helping the child. "Imagine the stress created by waking every morning to know that failure is inevitable yet again" (Gilchrist, 1997, p. 35). Imagine the far greater stress of being unable to articulate these strong feelings of futility and hopelessness.

... By the time they [dyslexic children] are in their second or third year of school they are often suffering from low self-esteem, having already failed academically in several areas.... They may have failed socially as well. They lack confidence and this can manifest itself in many ways, including attention-seeking behavior, withdrawal, aggression or a generally antisocial, anti-authoritarian attitude. (Dominy & Rees, 1997, p. 197)

Learned helplessness / learned success
Learned helplessness:

The term 'learned helplessness' originated from the animal experiments conducted by Seligman and Maier (1967) who inflicted random electrical shocks on dogs who, initially, could do nothing to escape the punishment. Later in the experiments, escape was made possible, but the animal no longer made the

attempt. Seligman (1975); Abrahams, Seligman and Teasdale, (1978) observed that human beings respond to similar situations with depression. The principle is that when there is no response possible that results in control over the situation, the individual will respond with lower levels of persistence and poorer performance quality to (and willingness to attempt) new and different tasks (Weisz & Cameron, 1985).

This principle of learned helplessness has since been used to explain a variety of puzzling human behaviors from the high rates of drug abuse and teenage pregnancies in impoverished areas to the Battered Woman Syndrome (Walker, 1979). This term and the related “passive failure” model (Johnston & Winograd, 1985) have also been applied directly to the behavior of dyslexic students who, because of repeated failure, believe themselves incapable of learning, and will no longer attempt to master reading (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Weisz & Cameron, 1985; Ziminsky, 1994).

Supporting this link between learned helplessness and poor academic performance, Lawrence (1985) suggests that the important point about self-esteem is not whether poor self-esteem leads to poor performance or visa versa, but that these two conditions reinforce each other and must be treated in tandem. Children with learning disabilities may have separate, discrete pockets of high and low confidence, at home or playing with friends as opposed to their school life. However feelings of poor self-worth ultimately become generalized to other areas of life with the result that children begin to believe that they are incapable of learning; therefore it is preferable that the learning problems and self-esteem

issues be addressed by the same people (Lawrence, 1985; Gilchrist, 1997; Thomson, 1997a).

Learned success:

Several educators are addressing this aspect of compensation through literacy programs. For example: the underlying principle behind a series of books designed for children with learning disabilities (Long et al. 1994 a,b) is to help the children reestablish feelings of control over what happens to them. Self-monitoring skills are linked with literacy. Exercises are designed to improve the children's understandings of their own particular strengths, learning styles, feelings and behavior. In addition, many programs utilize occupational therapists to conduct role-playing activities to encourage greater reflection about social situations, the relationships among the child's feelings, behavior and the responses of others (Thompson, 1997, b). Although Thompson (1997, a), Gilchrist (1997), Lawrence (1985) and Long et al. (1994) suggest that self-esteem problems should be addressed by those working directly on literacy remediation, there is nothing that indicates that children's areas of strength and high-confidence could not also be used to address areas requiring remediation⁴.

Whether the link between dyslexia and socially unacceptable behaviors is biologically-based, environmentally-based or some synergy between the two, dyslexics cannot succeed if, once established, this negative chain is unbroken. All parties concerned with the welfare of a learning disabled child must contend,

⁴Gardner's (1996) work on Multiple Intelligences, strongly suggests that areas of cognitive strength could indeed be used to redress areas of weakness.

not only with the original difficulties in acquiring specific competencies, but with the potential complicating factors of the self-destructive behaviors which are, I believe, associated with depression. If action is not taken to interrupt this downward spiral, even with improvement of certain literacy skills, the individual's over-all performance may not necessarily improve.

At least part of the solution seems to involve reestablishing a level of confidence and control over some meaningful aspect of their lives. The novelist and writer-producer of many popular television shows, Stephen J. Cannell, whose dyslexia went undiscovered well into his thirties, states:

The real fear that I have for dyslexic people is not that they have to struggle with jumbled input or that they can't spell, but that they will quit on themselves before they get out of school. Parents have to create victories whenever they can, whether it's music, sports or art. You want your dyslexic child to say: 'Yeah, reading's hard. But I have these other things I can do' (Cannell, 1999, p. 79)

In this quotation, Cannell (1999) advocates activities for dyslexic children that would provide opportunities to experience success, a reason to feel worthy. Not many would disagree with this assessment. I find it interesting, however, that the implicit assumption is that school is damaging for dyslexic children and the best that can be hoped is that they emerge not too disfigured. If, as I believe, dyslexics are the mining canaries of the educational system, is the educational atmosphere unhealthy for other students as well?

Good teaching in general education: different methods required?

Numerous treatments have been designed to remediate and to teach in a 'dyslexic-friendly' manner. A study by Shahl (1997) contends that many of these strategies had not been subjected to rigorous quantitative evaluation, and once

studied showed no more effectiveness than traditional methods. Furthermore, Stahl (1997) insists that although many of these strategies may or may not improve de-coding skills, they do not address the challenge of encouraging Chall's (1983) fifth, and highest, stage of reading in which readers combine knowledge from several sources to create new knowledge. "There is more to reading than de-coding" (Snowling & Nation, 1997, p. 162).

Stahl (1997) concludes that dyslexic children do not require strategies that are different than those effective with non-dyslexic children. He advocates, for all children, early (prior to the second grade) word identification instruction that takes into account the phonological awareness of the child, by simultaneously introducing letters and sounds. However, he emphasizes that it is important not to repeat methods in which that child has previously failed. Although Stahl (1997) strongly recommends a method of "echo-reading," which demonstrated considerable quantified success with a wide range of students both in one-on-one teaching and in the classroom, his emphasis is less on any special teaching methodology than it is on perceptive and well-prepared teachers.

Frank Smith (1985) also challenges the idea that dyslexics and non-dyslexics require different teaching strategies. He defines dyslexia as simply the condition of pre-literate individuals and contends that good de-coding strategies are not necessary for excellent reading comprehension. According to Smith (1985), the greatest factor in turning non-readers into readers is reading practice. This can only be achieved when the reading material is meaningful and interesting to the learner. "Children become readers when they are engaged in

situations where written language is being meaningfully used” (p. viii) “... to make sense of what they know and what they want to know” (p. x). Furthermore, “it is not difficult to make reading impossible.... One very effective way to produce incomprehensibility is to ensure that the person trying to read the book is apprehensive about making a mistake” (p ix). Although current research on the brain contradicts Frank Smith’s contention that there is nothing intrinsically different between dyslexics and non-dyslexics, excepting the absence of a specific skill, there is considerable validity to his contention that in order to read well, reading must be valued, not for the negative consequences of illiteracy, but because words in print give great pleasure. This general principal holds regardless of who the learner is.

By contrast, Linda Smith, founder of the Lab School in Washington, D.C, differs in her belief that dyslexic children require different teaching strategies from non-dyslexic children. Smith (1991) maintains that the learning disabled are more practically-oriented and have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, and the interplay of concepts, without concrete applications. As evidence, she states that both her young and adult students typically do not comprehend jokes or wordplay, the concept of time or ideas like ‘truth.’

Accordingly, these learning differences can be overcome with a greater emphasis on experiential, hands-on learning. Children with learning disabilities, therefore, should be taught with manipulation of actual objects and materials. Smith also advocates dramatic utilization of metaphors and analogies. For example, one teacher illustrated the relationships among a town, a city, a state

and a country by using a series of boxes of increasing size, stacked one inside the other. In addition, a great emphasis is placed on peer teaching; children may not take home their woodworking projects until they have successfully taught another child how to complete a project of his/her own. In both examples, intense engagement with the subject matter overcame memory problems.

It may be that Linda Smith's students have serious comprehension problems, but I do not believe that it is useful to generalize to the degree that she does. Dyslexic children have difficulty with the relationship between sounds and symbols. Dyspraxic children have difficulty with conceptualization and planning a scheme of action (Linge, 1997). Some children with dyslexia are also dyspraxic, have attention deficit syndrome and are hyperactive. There are many possible combinations of learning disabilities, but it is also quite possible to have dyslexia pure, without any other disability. It is, I believe, an unhelpful over-generalization to lump together all individuals with one or more *specific* learning disabilities into one overly broad category. However, Smith's (1991) and Stahl's (1997) methods for teaching, both utilize a multi-sensory approach intended to reinforce experience and capture a child's interest, which I am certain works well, is useful for all children, and especially necessary for children who are confused, stressed, demoralized and experiencing learning difficulties.

Rosalie Fink (1992, 1993, 1995/1996, 1998) makes many of the same observations as Linda Smith (1991) and Frank Smith (1985) concerning the importance of interest and motivation in her studies of successful, compensated adult dyslexics. She concludes that there are two conditions common to

successful dyslexic adults: good word identification strategies and interest. Strong, early and consistent remedial help that includes phonological decoding strategies and a driving fascination for some field of study or discipline, that directs the individual's reading practice, were the most consistent factors explaining success. However, her studies indicate that even highly successful adult dyslexics continue to make mistakes decoding individual words, leaning heavily on contextual cues. They are able to pick up and comprehend these cues because of a large store, built up over time, of prior knowledge about the subject matter.

Snowling and Nation (1997) report similar findings. In a study measuring reading comprehension, results indicated that dyslexics rely far more on contextual cues than either normal readers or non-dyslexic poor readers.

There's a significant effect of context; all children's reading improved when context was available to them... For accuracy, the context effect was greatest for the dyslexic poor readers and smallest for the poor comprehenders, with controls (normal readers) benefiting to an intermediate degree (Snowling & Nation, 1997, p. 162).

This study also indicated that phonological processing problems may persist even while reading accuracy improves. It also strongly suggests that teaching strategies emphasizing contextualized knowledge, while essential for dyslexics, are also beneficial to non-dyslexics.

Remediation through challenge and interest:

Hence although decoding skills are important, they are not as important as contextual availability, intensive reading practice and subject interest. The intensity level required can only occur with high interest and, most importantly,

challenging subject matter. That means that the level of difficulty of the reading material should be higher than the dyslexic can initially achieve. Furthermore comparing lists of the subject areas read by the compensated dyslexics studied to the fields of later success, I noticed in Fink's (1995/96) study that they were not necessarily the same subject areas. Thus, I conclude that any sustained experience of excitement and passion for any intellectual endeavor serves as a catalyst for later success.

Fink (1995/96, 1998) also discusses many practical implications of her findings centering on the importance of high interest reading content for dyslexics. However, Fink does not directly address the implication that dyslexic children would benefit from educational programs that combine literacy remediation with accelerated and challenging program content. Further interesting questions are suggested by Fink's (1998) finding that dyslexic individuals who later compensated reached a level of reading competence on average between ages 10 and 12, a three-year delay compared to average readers. Did this occur because there is simply a delay in skill acquisition? Does this occur because of the normal maturation, occurring just prior to the onset of adolescence, of the left hemisphere which then can take over the weakened functions of the right hemisphere (Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987)? Would the individual have compensated regardless of any intervention, or might maturation have allowed the individual to take full advantage of remedial experiences? Does compensation occur at this time because of a different emphasis in educational curricula that occurs in the middle school or junior high years away

from rote memorization and towards conceptualization? Might the compensation occur because the material in school became more interesting and the newly found interests encouraged increased reading practice and retention? Why do some dyslexics compensate, but others never do?

Authentic success and multi-sensory learning:

Dominy and Rees (1997) make a series of practical recommendations for classroom teachers, but first state the necessity of understanding the individual learner and being willing to be flexible about how material is presented. “The main challenge is the need to combine remediation with the delivery of a full curriculum” (Dominy & Rees, 1997, p. 203). They further warn against becoming patronizing by giving unearned or unwarranted praise and undemanding tasks. The child will recognize the deception and it would have the unintended effect of decreasing the child's confidence. Teachers should maintain a positive and confident attitude towards the student's ultimate success, downplaying weaknesses and avoiding failures if possible. Furthermore, small class size is also particularly important to enable the teacher to monitor the child's progress (Dominy & Rees, 1997).

Like Smith (1991) and Stahl (1997), Dominy and Rees (1997) recommend a multi-sensory approach which, “... engage[s] all the dyslexic child's pathways to learning... by associating the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modalities simultaneously” (p. 204). For example, children should be encouraged to paraphrase the material and visual cues, such as time lines, graphs and lists of relevant vocabulary, should be displayed in the classroom.

Once these concrete examples are provided of strategies and methods deemed appropriate for dyslexics, it becomes abundantly clear that good teaching for dyslexics is also good teaching for non-dyslexics. In either case, a highly organized, creative, energetic and perceptive teacher is required, who is willing to organize material in a variety of ways. Teachers who know their students are better able to guide their students' reading. Smaller class sizes mean teachers have the opportunity to get to know all their students' interests better. Interest in the subject matter means motivation to increase reading practice. People who read more become better readers. The primary difference between teaching dyslexic and non-dyslexic children seems to be that the negative effects of inappropriate educational practice are more quickly apparent.

Implications in general education: good teaching is good teaching:

In both *36 Children* (1967) and *Growing Minds* (1984) Herbert Kohl defines good teaching as extensive content knowledge presented in an organized fashion in ways that are interesting, exciting and approachable. Not once in either book does Kohl discuss children with specific learning disabilities, although statistically there must have been a few in his classes⁵. Yet Kohl's students had other reasons, as well, to feel betrayed and hurt by their past educational experiences. Kohl (1984) writes:

⁵Geschwind, 1985; Sullivan, 1996; Shaywitz, 1996; Edwards, 1994, and others state that dyslexics represent between 10 and 20% of people in the general population. Since there were 36 children, statistically speaking, Kohl may have taught between 4 and 8 dyslexic children in the class described in the 1967 book, *36 Children*.

A teacher can't be everything—parent, psychologist, social worker.... A teacher *can* provide a pathway to new skills, information, perceptions and personal strengths; *can* provide young people with a knowledge of how to learn and to teach themselves, no matter what the circumstances of life have forced upon them (p. 78).

The philosophical stance and the teaching methods concretely outlined by Kohl (1984, 1967) may have been designed for the general classroom, but just as the recommended teaching methods described earlier for dyslexics are useful for non-dyslexics, Kohl's guidelines are virtually identical to those advocated for children with specific learning disabilities. Good teaching is good teaching.

Kohl, who has considerable teaching experience in elementary and secondary schools, assumes that every child requires good teaching to be successful. The ultimate purpose of good teaching is to equip the learner to continue learning. The major assumption articulated in Kohl's books are that it is impossible to judge accurately another human being's limitations:

This conviction that there are clear levels and limits on what it is possible to achieve is exactly what good teachers resist. One cannot look into children's souls and see the extent and limits of their potential. Potential is not located in any part of the brain or in any organ. We don't know what people... could become, and any limit on expectations will become a limit on learning (1984, p. 58).

However equally essential to developing successful ways of presenting material, teachers must "gauge students levels of sophistication and the modes of learning they are accustomed to using" (Kohl, 1984, p.57). With this, the teacher must have, what he calls a "teaching sensibility" (p. 57), which is the knowledge of how to help students focus their energy on learning. Kohl distinguishes the word "energy" from the more usual 'potential,' as a more productive concern of teachers:

All youngsters have this energy, and a substantial part of the craft of teaching consists of knowing how to tap into children's energy sources or removing impediments to their flow. (1984, p. 58)

It is very important to note that Kohl assumes that everyone, not just those with learning disabilities, will at one time or another have impediments to learning and the teacher's job is to find ways around these obstacles by paying attention to the learners' interests and ways of learning.

'Paying attention' has been called by a variety of names, including 'respect' (Meier, 1995), 'connectedness' (Foster, 1991)⁶, 'care' (Noddings, 1992)⁷, Davidson, 2000)⁸ and 'relational education' (Pariser, 1990)⁹. Essentially it means that the teacher has empathy for the students and looks for what is unique, valuable and exciting to the students in order to find ways to engage the children with the school material.

To teach successfully, one must have the opportunity to pay attention to one's students. One must learn what they are experiencing, and how it feels to be who they are.... Both teacher and student must be paying attention. (Pariser, 1990, p.6)

Kohl (1984) refers to this philosophical stance intentionally taken by good teachers as "loving the students as learners" (p. 64). This "loving" is not an emotion and does not necessarily presume liking, but rather it describes acts of imagination and purposefulness in discovering or inventing ways to help a person

⁶Foster (1991) is concerned primarily with racial issues that alienate children from the classroom.

⁷Nell Noddings (1992) discusses care in terms of mathematics education.

⁸Davidson (2000) discusses 'care' in direct relation to the importance of art activities in elementary schools. Her students had race and second language issues, as well as learning disabilities, working against them in the regular classroom.

⁹Emanuel Pariser (1990) writes about the disengagement of adolescent 'school failures'.

learn. Paying attention to the learner necessitates a suspension of the teacher's ego about whether or not s/he will be successful as a teacher, or whether or not s/he is liked, in order to focus on the children's particular strengths. These strengths are the key to marshaling children's energy to learn. This "love" is used synonymously by Kohl (1984) with "faith":

Faith in the learner leads some teachers to find strengths where others see nothing but weakness and failure. (p. 64)

However if paying attention is the first step, the next is attending to what was learned from the students. "Teaching does not consist solely of making youngsters feel good about themselves. It involves helping students acquire understanding, knowledge, and skills they didn't previously have" (Kohl, 1984, p.89). In order to be flexible enough to attend appropriately to teachable moments and present material tailored to fit the children, the teacher must have a very thorough knowledge of the subject, far beyond what s/he expects to teach at that time. Yet, knowledge is insufficient without a passion for the content¹⁰. The teacher, him or herself, must be fascinated by explorations of the subject and open to productive tangents. Hence, Kohl advocates a thematic approach in which concepts can be approached through various points of view represented by different disciplines, i.e. visual art, science, music, sports, mathematics, writing, etc. The main point of thematic teaching is that there are many different routes to acquiring understanding and a teacher should master as many as

¹⁰In *The Passionate Teacher*, Fried (1995) argues that a passion for content is contagious and provides young people with a model of the joy and excitement of intense interest and engagement with matters of the mind. Passionate teachers will strive to present material with richness and complexity, suggestive of exciting and unanswered questions, creating an appetite for more to learn.

possible. If one way does not work, another may. Like Stohl (1997), Kohl (1984) warns against continuing to use methods that have previously failed.

It should be a basic teaching maxim that if an explanation fails with a particular student, another tack should be taken. Too many teachers deal with students who do not understand by repeating the same explanations until both students and teachers give up (Kohl, 1984, p. 99).

Another important point concerning the teacher's mastery of the content is that it frees the teacher to play with the content in a variety of ways until the material is comprehensible to the children. Kohl (1984) discusses in depth the importance of playfulness in the classroom. Using the Italian word 'giuoco', he says that distinctions between work and play are not necessarily common outside the United States. There is a 'play' that is not limited to recreation and is considered a prelude to learning. It is more like an examination of ideas in different configurations and from different points of view. His description reminded me of both watching infants play with sounds prior to actual speech and what artists mean when they say they are playing with different arrangements of elements.

Finally, this "giuoco" is in the service of the development of "sophisticated" (Kohl, 1984, p. 107) thinking. Kohl says that even very young children are capable of perceiving and comprehending complex relationships among ideas and entertaining several lines of thought simultaneously. It involves imaginative experimentation and the grasping of the "structural properties of whole systems, rather than just unrelated facts and concepts" (Kohl, 1984, p. 107). It is simultaneously carrying several lines of thought in one's mind and being able to classify, compare and contrast. It is global thinking, 'scientific' thinking (Dewey,

1934), 'visual', 'artistic', or 'productive' thinking (Arnheim, 1969). This sophistication does not necessarily describe vast accumulation of knowledge, or knowledge in any particular field, but rather how an individual uses his or her mind.

... There are many ways to develop sophisticated thinking. Some people learn to ...manage ideas through sound, color, or the manipulation of visual images or physical objects. They use metaphor to express thought. Others use numbers or words. Some people become sophisticated when they are challenged by more experienced people.... What has astonished me through my teaching career is the number of school failures that are intellectually sophisticated and the number of 'good' students who fall apart when any degree of intellectual sophistication is demanded of them. (Kohl, 1984, p. 109)

Kohl (1984) insists that sophisticated thinking is teachable. He suggests, though, that it is neither encouraged nor discovered in a learner without discussion; he uses the German word 'sprache', which he defines as thoughtful speech. Blaming the demands of overly-structured curriculum to 'cover' specific material in a certain time and order, Kohl contends that this 'talk' is essential to the development of reflective and sensitive complex thinkers. Furthermore, sophisticated thinking cannot be formally structured into a list of ordered behavioral objectives; that is, there is no particularly efficient way to teach or test sophisticated thinking.

Regardless of whether or not the Theory of Multiple Intelligences yields more useful ways to understand the complexity of human intelligence, part of Gardner's (1993a) justification for developing an alternative way to understand human intelligence was the contention that the traditional intelligence tests, good

at predicting success in school, *do not* predict success outside school.¹¹ Kohl (1984) says that the development of sophisticated thinking is important for success in life. This means that skills important to intelligence tests are important in schools, but skills necessary for successful use of the mind in the individual's life may be unrelated to scoring well on IQ tests.

It is very important to note that the processes and teaching practices advocated by Kohl (1984, 1967) for the general classroom that promote the development of sophisticated thinking correspond with recommendations for teaching dyslexic learners (Stohl, 1997; Dominy & Rees, 1997). Connecting the three thoughts outlined above from Gardner (1993a), Kohl (1987) and Stohl, (1997) / Dominy and Rees (1997), the emphasis in schools should be on the ultimate value of promoting life success. Misplacing the emphasis of instruction on improving children's standardized test scores may be more obviously damaging to some learners than others, but ultimately serves no one well. Educational circumstances that emphasize using the mind well, however that mind is structured, benefit both dyslexics and non-dyslexics.

Visual arts and learned-success:

In the early stages of art study, a student is not penalized for poor language skills. In fact, certain typical dyslexic "... strengths in reasoning, problem-solving, concept formation, critical thinking and vocabulary" (Swaywitz, 1996) may make the dyslexic highly suited to the study of the visual arts. Winner

¹¹My suggestion that schools attempt to teach people to take IQ tests (which in fact is what Kohl, 1967, taught his 36 children so that they could get into a better educational situation), raises questions about the value of this kind of instruction and the objectivity of the tests.

and Casey (1992) reported a disproportional representation (35%) of dyslexic individuals enrolled as art majors in Boston area universities.

Successful artists, according to Winner and Casey (1992), Rothenberg (1979) and Getzels and Csikszentmihaly (1990), were likely to be problem-finders, rather than merely problem-solvers. That is, "... the essence of their creative style lay in their tendency to set challenges for themselves, to pose problems to which they did not know the answer, and then to struggle to find a solution" (Winner and Casey, 1992, p. 156). Compensated dyslexics often display a similar tolerance for ambiguity, ability to pose unique questions, persevere through numerous obstacles, display certain visual/spatial talents and a tendency to encode information visually (Shaywitz, 1996; Edwards, 1994; West, 1991). Winner & Casey (1992) state that many dyslexics become artists either to avoid weakness or to maximize strengths. It could be that both are true; but more importantly, it could be that maximizing strengths plays an essential role in minimizing weaknesses.

Kohl (1984) maintains that the arts are one possible route towards the ultimate goal of developing sophisticated thinking. Although the visual arts are not represented in Gardner's Intelligences, each of the other Intelligences "can be directed towards artistic ends" (Gardner, 1989, p. 74). Hence everyone possesses talents that may, if s/he is interested, be focused aesthetically and everyone can participate usefully in the arts. "In nearly every area, an individual's perceptual or comprehension capacities develop well in advance of productive capacities" (Gardner, 1989, p. 75).

However quite often in the arts, “production usually precedes comprehension” (Gardner, 1989, p. 73). Typically, the learning loop begins with practice informing theory. Children learn through “observation, demonstration, and coaching-in-context” (Gardner, 1989, p. 75). The visual arts, then, are often presented to students much in the same way that Smith (1991) and Dominy and Rees (1997) advocate, with actions and consequences, cause and effect, intimately and obviously, tied together. It could be that teaching methodology typical in the visual arts, being dyslexic-friendly, is a major factor in the disproportionate representation of dyslexics in the visual arts. Yet whether dyslexics are disproportionally represented in the visual arts because of an “intrinsic gift” (West, 1991) or appropriate teaching, a “discovery orientation” (Winner & Casey, 1992, p. 156) and an outsider identity coupled with a tendency to encode information visually are characteristic both of artists and compensated dyslexics. This suggests that the arts could play a useful role in compensation for dyslexia.

While other disciplines may also reward ‘dyslexic’ strengths, perhaps typical dyslexic deficits make early investigations into these fields less rewarding.

Early advancement in the visual arts is possible without strong language skills, but at advanced levels art practice requires language skills and literacy.

Communication, criticism and research skills are important for the usual careers in the visual arts, such as teaching, graphics and the entrepreneurial / artist-craftsperson. If the dyslexic individuals are interested in continued advancement in the visual arts, they may put into practice the new literacy skills.

Other researchers make more direct claims for the role of art-training in successful dyslexics' achievements. In a study by Silver (1989), children with serious language disabilities benefited dramatically from literacy training that included drawing and clay modeling lessons. According to Silver (1989), common to art, mathematics and reading are "certain irreducible concepts: the concept of a class or group of objects, concepts of space and concepts of sequential order" (p. 117).

The WISC tests, often used to evaluate cognitive strengths and weaknesses in learning disabled children, are divided into Performance and Verbal tests. However much current research suggests that these tests would be more usefully divided into tasks of spatial, conceptual and sequencing abilities (Silver, 1989). Usually, children with dyslexia score very highly in the spatial tests, medium in the conceptual and low on the sequencing tasks. Therefore, remediation would utilize the spatial and conceptual strengths to redress the sequencing deficits. Silver (1989) theorizes that remediation would be more effective if it occurred in a medium unaffected by the language problems. His hypothesis is that the skills and concepts learned doing art activities would be transferable to learning in mathematics and the language arts.

The visual arts are under attack at every level in our educational system. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (1991) states that an important compensatory technique includes developing skill in a medium unaffected by the learning disability. As an artist-teacher, I believe that the perceptual awareness and the 'giuoco' (Kohl, 1987) or perceptual play/work involved in the study of art

uniquely enriches everyone's enjoyment, awareness and satisfaction in life.

However as a compensated dyslexic, I also believe that for some learners an arts education can provide useful perceptual habits and rare experiences of success, pleasure in learning and excitement in discovery using the intellect. For that reason participation in an arts education could make the difference to investing the will and the courage necessary to succeed.

Dyslexia and the ceramic arts:

As a ceramist and ceramics teacher, I have noticed that the ceramic arts share with other visual arts a disproportionate number of dyslexic artists, students (Winner & Casey, 1992) and hobbyists. As both a dyslexic and a ceramist, I have privileged insider understanding of the demands of the field and the difficulties of being dyslexic. The damning phrase educational specialists often use describes the struggling child as a 'global' learner. This means that the child has difficulty with de-contextualized information--that is, meaningless, isolated facts. According to some educational specialists, this is a bad thing, predictive of academic failure. Yet it is difficult for me to imagine a worse way to teach, nor a more joyless and tedious way to learn, than whatever is the opposite of 'global.' For at least sixty years, educators have insisted that learning occurs more easily, deeply and lastingly for everyone if it has real relevance to the learner (Dewey, 1934, 1938; Ashton-Warner, 1963; Kohl, 1967, 1984; Schon, 1987;

Fried, 1995)¹². This relevance is established when information is related to experience, placing the learning within a context that makes explicit the usefulness of the knowledge, and relationships and patterns within a field, or global learning.

It seems to me that the devaluing of global learning relates more to concepts of efficient school organization than it does to real value and complexity in human thought. The multiple choice or standardized test is easier to score than the essay test, for example. Yet, is there any dispute that the learning necessary to put knowledge into practice is deeper and ultimately more useful than high performance on a standardized test (Kohl, 1967)? Not unlike the circularity of gauging intelligence by how well individuals can complete tests of intelligence (Gardner, 1993), the over-valuing of knowledge that is easily tested and scored seems to have more to do with justifying testing methods than evaluating hierarchies of learning. As mentioned earlier, contextual cues are absolutely essential for dyslexics' reading compensation (Snowling & Nation, 1997) because single word decoding errors will persist throughout life (Fink, 1996). Undervaluing contextualized learning and overvaluing de-contextualized

¹²Since the nineteenth century, educators have argued for and about, named and renamed, 'progressive education', 'project method', 'open education', etc., which is intended to promote (interchangeably) 'scientific' thinking advocated by Dewey (1934), 'productive' or 'visual thinking' recommended by Arnheim (1969), or Kohl's 'sophisticated thinking.' This is thinking that is clear, logical and complex, grounded in real world experience. This approach depends upon children's active engagement in creating their own learning through the perception and reflection encouraged by discussion, hands-on experimentation, writing and other 'making' activities (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Kohl, 1967, 1984). It includes thematic (sorting, classifying, contextualizing) approaches, criticism with an emphasis on organizing questions (Meier, 1995), and open conversations about meanings and relationships among concepts (Schon, 1987; Fried, 1995; Meier, 1995). Part of my argument is that this type of educational structure, advocated for 'normal' children, was described as particularly important for the dyslexic learners, both in the literature and in the interviews, which follow. Furthermore, this structure was available to the dyslexic artists in their ceramics classrooms.

learning is essentially demanding a route to learning that is unavailable to dyslexic children, and is of questionable value for any child. The implications for everything from teaching methods to class size follow directly from the original assumption that what is valuable is what is easily and economically taught and evaluated.

Ceramics, values that are difficult to test:

At the introductory level in ceramics, as with most of the visual arts, sports and drama, impressive results can be achieved by beginners despite poor reading, spelling or mathematical skills. At this level, these activities offer beginners a variety of benefits, including release of tension and frustration, self-expression, opportunities to explore concepts (and relationships among concepts) non-verbally, pride of accomplishment and self-esteem (Edwards, 1994; Duffy & Geschwind, 1985). Areas of specific dyslexic difficulty, such as sequencing, short term memory, spatial concepts and general organizational concepts may be exercised (Silver, 1989).

In a survey of 120 Quebec junior college (C.E.G.E.P.) students to determine the value of ceramics as an elective course, Eden (1996) found that these non-art majors believed that an unexpected benefit of their ceramics course was improvement in their self-esteem because they worked through problems from beginning to end, learning important lessons about themselves and their ability to be creative. About half of both the handbuilding and throwing students claimed that they synthesized knowledge gained from other courses and other areas of their lives in order successfully to complete ceramics projects.

However a particularly interesting finding of Eden's (1996) study was that outside the ceramics studio, students felt that they rarely had the opportunity to express themselves, working with both their hands and their heads, to produce objects that were meaningful to them¹³. These students found ceramics classes to be fun, relaxing and useful as a release from stress and tension. They also used information from other classes as well as their experience outside school to successfully complete projects. Eden (1996) does not suggest that other arts might not also offer these benefits to students, but that ceramics was one of the few art courses open to non-art majors. He does state that ceramics is unusually accessible and rewarding to beginners while also offering substantial challenges to advanced students.

Eden (1996) continues to describe the teaching methodology utilized in these classes, which involve discussion and criticism, demonstration and student practice of skills under the tutelage of an experienced craftsman. This description is consistent with Kohl's (1984) "sophisticated" thinking in which complex understandings of knowledge relationships are constructed.

Achieving success for dyslexics in the field of ceramics is possible because global, contextualized and practical understandings of knowledge are

¹³Patrick Finn (1999) in *Literacy with an Attitude*, NY: SUNY says that discouraging questioning and critical discussion is a class issue aimed at the maintenance of a class nexus, the education of poor kids into future menial jobs. Relying heavily on Paulo Freire's (1997) *Pedagogy of the Heart* and the 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Finn says that elite schools teach elite children that knowledge is created and that they are therefore taught how to speak up and question. Similarly, but from a slightly different perspective, in Challenger's (1997) book, *Stories of Resilience in Childhood*, finding a 'voice', learning how to articulate their feelings, expressing themselves, and constructing a theory to explain their experience was an essential ingredient in the development of resiliency, escaping the risk factors predictive of impending failure. Therefore opportunities for self-expression and discussion play important roles in developing self-efficacy.

encouraged. The ceramic arts encompass a huge quantity of information in a vast spectrum of far-flung fields. Although it is unusual for even a professional ceramist to be expert in every possible use of clay, general knowledge and the ability to find access to specific technical information is imperative. In addition, professional ceramists may have a working knowledge of mathematics (geometry and calculus), physics, engineering and plumbing because these are necessary for the ordinary operation of the studio, the stacking, firing, design, building and maintenance of kilns. Although pre-packaged commercial clays and glazes are available, as are computer-controlled electric and gas kilns, a working knowledge of chemistry and thermal dynamics are important for achieving a professional level of control over the product and consistent clay and glaze results. Knowledge of aesthetics, two and three-dimensional design and all the traditional art-related skills are assumed. Since criticism requires strong perception and language skills, a large part of ceramics education involves the development of these skills.

Because of the strong link between aesthetics and function in ceramics, the question is always present, "How is an object used and why?" The 'why?' question links ceramics history not only to the other arts, but to most of the social sciences as well. Most societies throughout world history have made ceramic objects for preparation, storage and presentation of food, spiritual or religious observance, housing and ornamentation (both personal and household). Knowledge of history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, mythology, literature, religion and politics are, therefore, not uncommon among professional ceramists

(Eden, 1996). Furthermore many ceramists either operate small businesses or are teachers, and therefore verbal communication and social skills, knowledge of business, economics and accounting are useful.

Because ceramics sits at the crossroads of all these fields, complex understandings of the interrelationships among ideas are encouraged. Acquisition of this knowledge occurs through conversation/discussion, demonstration, experimentation, apprenticeship, hands-on experience with the materials and through texts.

Clay is heavy and equipment is expensive, therefore cooperation is essential in ceramics studios. In a ceramics studio, it is clear who is dependable and who is not. 'Flakiness' is a deeply unattractive quality when the consequences of being let down are that artwork or equipment is ruined, or someone hurt. In my teaching practice, I have noticed that social supports, friendships and deep trust often develop within ceramics studios because of this. This support occurs among individuals of various ages and experience levels, partly because ceramics courses typically are scheduled with beginners, intermediates and advanced levels meeting at the same time in the same studio classroom.

Ceramists often socialize outside of studio time with one another, partially because of the aforementioned trust and friendship encouraged by the studio environment, but also because of common values and strong feelings about the medium. For many ceramists, clay is not dead earth, but alive and responsive. The technical demands of the medium are such that ceramists talk about

collaborating with, and respecting, their clay. In addition, ceramic terms are often anthropomorphic. The parts of a pot coincide to parts of the human figure: lip, shoulder, belly, foot.

Typical metaphors reflect playful thoughtfulness: clay has a memory. The layers of this simple phrase are typical of the shop talk of ceramic artists. Literally, an accidental kink or twist that occurs during an early forming process, although subsequently corrected, will often return during the drying or firing of the object. The clay 'remembers' the mistake and returns to it. But because clay is plastic, it also 'remembers' and records with amazing accuracy the lightest or most forceful touches from hands or tools, and therefore is ideal for expression of subtle feeling and emotion. Hence, the clay 'remembers' the feeling, sometimes even before the artists know that they have felt it.

The man who commented that clay completes him was making a subtle, but profound reference to this metaphor. As a dyslexic, memory and language are problems solved by the clay. It could be that in the ceramics studio, dyslexic individuals can find the conditions needed for success: a passion that becomes motivation, a slow and steady building up of technical, language and aesthetic skills, inexhaustible challenges and technical demands requiring research, social reinforcement for learning and reliability, and the opportunity to express, release and communicate feeling.

Summary:

Chapter I reviews some of the relevant factors affecting the learning process of a dyslexic individual. The Important factors include:

1. **Biology**: the nature of brain differences associated with the dyslexia.
2. **Environment**: the culture into which the dyslexic is born, and the perceptions and actions of individuals associated with the dyslexic. It includes all aspects of remedial activity, as well as social activities.
3. **Self-perception**: of the dyslexic individual and the psychological consequences of positive and negative experiences. This category includes identity issues.
4. **Good teaching**: is thorough knowledge and understanding of the learners' interests, levels of sophistication and learning. It involves thorough knowledge of the field taught, which makes playful, exciting and flexible presentation of material possible.
5. **Intense interest**: the closely related 'accident' of fascination with some field of study. Wise guidance through social and educational interactions leaves these challenges where the dyslexic individual will likely discover them. I have also speculated that in the arts, in this case the ceramic arts, dyslexic individuals could become fascinated well before encountering the frustrations associated with reading difficulties.

Chapter II: Methodology

Through the looking glass

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Introduction:

Numerous studies have focused on aspects of dyslexic failure (Edwards, 1994; Sullivan et al, 1996; Osmond & Morrison, 1992; Butkowsky and Willows, 1980; Frith, 1997; Gilchrist, 1997; Riddick, 1996; West, 1991 and Ziminisky, 1993). Several researchers have addressed possible links between dyslexia (and/or poor reading skills) and art as a career choice (Winner & Casey, 1992; Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988; Aaron & Guillemard, 1993; West, 1991). Studies by Fink (1992; 1993; 1995/96; 1998) have examined common attributes of professionally successful compensated dyslexic adults. These studies indicate that not only is competent literacy remediation necessary, but persistent, on-going reading practice is essential. A consuming, passionate interest, involvement, curiosity in some field of study drives and directs this reading.

Studying success, rather than failure (Challener, 1997)¹⁴, has the advantage of suggesting positive directions for improvement of services and attitudes of those responsible for guiding the development of individuals at risk. Yet despite apparently high percentages of dyslexic individuals who have made

¹⁴Challener's (1997) study, which investigated resilience in children, isolated three key sources of support to children at risk: family, neighbors and schools or churches. Mothers and grandmothers were especially important. This supports Edward's (1994) study of dyslexic boys, but also parallels the experiences described in the interviews that follow.

successful careers in the arts, I found no literature linking compensation for dyslexia to study, and passionate interest, in the visual arts.

I do not intend to suggest that all ceramists are dyslexic, nor that all dyslexics are artists, nor even that a majority are. I have simply plucked one filament from a strand suggestive that after certain key literacy thresholds have been crossed, by whatever means, intense passion for an intellectual pursuit that is tolerant of learning differences is an important piece to the puzzle. My particular puzzle concerns relationships between success in the ceramic arts and compensation for dyslexia.

The Study:

Between May and September 2000, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews with seven highly successful dyslexic ceramic artists about how their dyslexia and their passion for the ceramic arts affected their learning and their lives. The artists who spoke with me are unquestionably accomplished, by any measurement, in an intensely competitive and difficult field.

Success in the ceramic arts can be defined in many ways. Initially, I defined success in monetary terms, i.e. making a living from the knowledge and experience in the ceramic arts. Some of the subjects were artist-entrepreneurs, others were artist-teachers, two were full-time artist-teachers, but now split their time between being studio artists and conducting workshops. However this aspect of professionalism, making things that sell or selling the knowledge of making things with clay, was an insufficient definition for the portrayal of excellence that I had intended. The quality of the artwork, itself, and the

contributions made to the field of the ceramic arts, is relevant to my aim. Hence recognition and general consensus by peers in the ceramic arts became a substantial factor in developing a definition of success. I also included images of each artist's work in their interviews.

Few of these artists had been tested for dyslexia. Therefore, I first looked for strong evidence of typical patterns of difficulties in early education, and their multi-faceted consequences, as specified in Butkowsky and Willows, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Fink, 1992, 1993, 1995/6, 1998; Frith, 1997; Gilchrist, 1997; Osmond & Morrison, 1992; Riddick, 1996; and Sullivan et al; 1996). After that, I searched for the roots of their intense interest in the visual arts, particularly ceramics. Finally, I invited the artists to speculate about any connections between their current career success in the ceramic arts and any aspect of their dyslexia.

Because I think that success for anyone is more an act of will than an extraordinary and inherent talent, I looked for evidence from the artists that, at least in part, their success stemmed from what they had learned about coping with dyslexia, rather than that their achievement was linked *directly* to the brain organization that caused both a disability and a gift (West, 1991). As mentioned earlier, Gardner (1983, 1989, 1993) did not find an Intelligence for art, but rather that all the Intelligences could, if desired, be used towards aesthetic ends. If it were true that their artistic 'talent' was a developed interest utilizing areas of cognitive strength, channeled towards aesthetic ends, the role of the educational environment would be enormous. The opposite of this statement is that 'talent

will out' regardless, and the role of education is not to interfere with the inevitable.

Qualitative research interviews:

My approach to these interviews was primarily informed by Kvale (1996) who describes a qualitative research interview as a professional conversation, having both structure and purpose, about the daily life of the interviewee. This conversation is

... an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena. (p. 6)

Furthermore, Gilger (1992) reports that the accuracy of retrospective self-reported data from normal to high-achieving individuals, especially in the middle age range, was highly accurate. Subjects were chosen who were both high-achieving ceramic artists, as defined above, and at least 40 years old.

To collect, describe and analyze the data for this study required two to four audio taped, qualitative interview sessions with each subject. The reason for the small number of subjects was that the depth of the information required made a study with more individuals impractical. In addition to their age and level of achievement, these individuals are

1. **Dyslexic**, as evidenced by self-reports, diagnostic reports, teacher reports or school records indicating a persistent pattern of decoding, spelling and writing errors; and difficulty with sequencing of digits, etc. after the third grade, about eight years old, (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991, Fink, 1996; Miles, 1995; Edwards, 1994; Long, et al, 1994; Shaywitz, 1989, 1994; Goswami, 1997, Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987, Smith, 1991), and have

2. **Compensated** for dyslexia, in so much as they circumnavigate persisting problems or symptoms. These problems and symptoms no longer interfere with normal function.
3. **Male, Caucasian, and heterosexual:** This was not by design, but (as explained below), because other subjects were unavailable.

These subjects were solicited from lists I compiled of volunteers from my presentation on dyslexia and the ceramic arts at the *National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts*, a professional organization of ceramists, and from informal discussions that occurred during *NCECA* conferences and ceramics workshops I have led. Subjects were not paid for their participation in my research.

Three independent readers with academic credentials reviewed the edited transcripts of the taped interviews to critique the veracity of my analysis. Revisions were made according to their comments. The subjects were given the option of having their identities kept confidential and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, as indicated in the Ethics section below. The Consent sheet and Summary Protocol Forms are included in Appendices I and II. The edited transcripts are contained in Chapter III.

Data from the transcripts was sorted according to similarities and differences. These similarities and differences suggested the following themes:¹⁵

1. Symptoms of dyslexia
2. General educational experiences
3. Art and ceramic education, experiences and consequences
4. Relationships among dyslexia, ceramics and career success.

¹⁵ Both the edited transcripts and the analysis section were reviewed by the independent readers.

These themes were used to answer the questions:

What is the perceived relationship between career success and compensation?

To what degree does it matter that success was achieved in the field of ceramics?

Unstructured Protocols:

Although prior to my first interview I constructed a lengthy protocol of questions that I intended to ask, I discarded this protocol in favor of a general outline. Hence, each interviewee was not necessarily asked the same questions in the same order, but all addressed the same key areas. A guided conversation (Kvale, 1996), these interviews began with questions about the subjects' backgrounds, early education, families, early problems with reading and/or mathematics and early art experiences. Next we discussed their ceramics careers, including how they came to ceramics, their feelings about the material, and their artistic intentions. Finally we discussed possible links between their dyslexia and their current success in ceramics.

I found that it worked best for me to speak as little as possible, mostly indicating my comprehension and interest in their answers. My open-ended questions were intended to guide the conversation towards the four areas described above without over-controlling or limiting the possible answers. However, I did ask questions or made statements that clarified my understanding of what had been said.

The interviews commenced only after several unrecorded conversations in which the subjects were made aware of the nature of my research, how the

information would be used, what to expect of the interviews, what I was asking them to do, and what I would do to insure their comfort and safety. These unrecorded sessions approximately totaled one and a half hours per person. But no pre-session lasted longer than forty-five minutes. All of the subjects signed a contract which made explicit what would occur. Although all the subjects had the opportunity to have their identities kept confidential, none of them chose that option.

At the end of each interview, I asked for any additional points the subject thought were important to include and we set an appointment for a subsequent interview session. At the conclusion of the final interview session, I thanked the person once again, repeated what I would do next, when I would contact the subject, and when to expect the transcripts for approval. Shortly thereafter, I sent a formal letter, with thanks, repeating all of this information.

Limitations:

Qualitative research is collaborative research. However, it is a collaboration of unequal partners because the “researcher controls the situation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). The researcher controls the questions, the selection of quotes and any paraphrases, the ordering and juxtaposition of the subject’s thoughts alongside other material. Although the interviewee may be a guide to his or her lived world, it is the researcher who guides all subsequent readers through that same world.

Similarly, Murray Edelman (1995) establishes a strong link between perception and selection. To a large extent, what we notice are things that have

some importance in our experience. Quite often, we notice and remember what we expect will be there. At best, literally as well as figuratively, we see what can be seen from where we stand. What we perceive, then, is not necessarily what is empirically there, but a synthesis of our previous experience, affect, and what we believe *ought* to be there. Everything researchers understand from the subjects is filtered through the tinted lenses of their experience, goals and values. This seems to be a given in all research (Kvale, 1996; Lee, 1993; Anderson, 1990; Lazarsfeld, 1972). The power of qualitative research is that it openly acknowledges the collaboration between the researcher and the researched. However, it may also be the source of many design weaknesses in my particular study.

A specific problem that I encountered involves definitions that are very important to this study, but are also highly dependent upon qualitative judgment. In the Review of Literature, my attempts to define “dyslexia” yielded lists of symptoms and behaviors and a physical description of brain differences, etc. Defining the structural and functional deviations from ‘normal’ is never clear-cut precisely because of the difficulties of defining normalcy. Even in the medical field, where presumably there are empirical measurements, conditions are sometimes defined as pathologies, but later are redefined as ‘variations.’ The role of selection and interpretation (Edelman, 1995), even when experts know what they are measuring and how to measure it, is enormous and wrapped up in the social, political and economic values of the community.

The invisible disability, dyslexia, is a moving target. '*Who is dyslexic?*' is not as simple a question to answer as it would appear, even for cognitive psychologists. Subjects old enough to have attained professional success in the ceramic arts for the most part did not have the kinds of diagnostic evaluations available to a child today. A child today might not receive evaluation for a vast number of reasons. Even if this contemporary child were evaluated, the role of interpretation is significant. As neurologists learn more about the human brain, they will no doubt develop tests that will remove some, but likely not all, of the qualitative judgment from this question. This left open the problem for me of determining who was eligible for my study.

A second problem encountered was defining "compensation." Fink's (1996) study defined dyslexic compensation as accepting that there would be persistent spelling and single word decoding errors, but that the large amount of reading and the high comprehension level characteristic of the individuals was consistent with Chall's (1983) highest stage of reading accomplishment in which new knowledge is created by combining sources. In effect, the lower levels of Chall's (1983) stages of reading accomplishment could be skipped if higher levels were achieved by virtue of heavy reliance on a store of contextual knowledge. However, my access to fully compensated dyslexic ceramists who consistently read large amounts of texts, are thoughtful and articulate, willing and able to participate in my research, was more limited than I expected. Because I was more interested in their *aesthetic* development and professional success than in their reading, per se, I concentrated more on their highly developed

ceramics research skills. These skills were necessary for their elevated accomplishment and include both textual and practical ways of accessing information.

Another limitation is the small sample size. The small sample number may suggest certain conclusions or explanations for success, but I will not generalize these conclusions to dyslexics in general, dyslexic artists, or even dyslexic ceramic artists. However, the conversational approach that made large numbers impractical also proved to be dyslexia-friendly. It generated a richness and quality of information that I believe other approaches would not have yielded. This study is useful in two ways: it renders specific portraits of individuals and indicates a general direction for further research.

Another problem with qualitative judgments, involving perception and selection, concerns my own background. As I indicated earlier, my strength as a researcher in this study is that I am an 'insider' as a compensated dyslexic ceramist. Conversely, this may also be a weakness. 'Counter-transference' occurs when the researcher identifies with his or her subjects. This can be good because it establishes the empathy necessary for trust and good communication. However, it is also easy to fail to recognize the importance of data that has no precedence in my own experience. I have taken steps to offset this problem. First, I allowed several occasions for the subjects, themselves, to correct my paraphrasing, sequencing and interpretations of their responses to my questions. Essentially, the interviews became collaborative essays with the interviewed artists, who chose how they would present themselves. Second, the transcripts

were reviewed by outside readers to critique the validity of my interpretations. However, I recognize that who I asked, the questions I asked, how I asked them, and upon what I focused attention, may tilt the scales.

Finally, and most obviously, the seven artists interviewed are white heterosexual males. This was not by design. I have absolutely no doubt that dyslexic females, homosexuals and members of ethnic minorities are present and making formidable contributions to the ceramics field as both teachers and entrepreneurs, but I was unable to interview them. Although I have included my own story, my experiences probably are less representative of my gender than some. I do suspect that being a member of more than one minority group would make people feel more cautious about participation in this type of study.

When approaching females, I encountered strong reactions indicative of fear and anger. One woman said: "Everyone wants to study me and nobody wants to help me!" I approached four females, one graduate student and three university ceramics teachers. Only the student gave me a reason for declining to be interviewed, "Everyone wants to study me...", and I did not believe that it was appropriate to press for reasons, fearing that they would feel harassed. The three female academic-artists were in tenure track jobs and close to their tenure decisions. I think that they feared negative consequences should they be identified as dyslexic. I made the decision to continue with males only, knowing that their experiences likely would be different from the females, because I believe that I would build greater credibility after completing one successful research project that was respectful of the participants. I completely understand

the reluctance of the women whom I approached. In their place with absolutely no reason to trust me, I might also have been reluctant to take chances with my hard-won success. As a feminist, as a female dyslexic, as a ceramist, I wanted to include a wide range of experience. The difficulty of locating dyslexic females and other minority members and, once found, their reluctance to participate is a peculiar irony of this project.

Further complicating my difficulty finding eligible female participants is that female dyslexics are under-identified. Fink (1998) states that there is an equal distribution of male and female dyslexics, but that females are under-diagnosed. She concludes that girls in academic trouble tend to become shy and withdrawn. In a crowded classroom with more disruptive students, teachers were more likely to overlook the problems of a girl who is compliant and non-disruptive. Fink's (1996) subjects, high-achieving female dyslexics, claim that little pressure was put on them to achieve academically either by parents or teachers because both teachers and parents believed that the girls could avoid the eventual problems of earning an income by 'marrying well.' In addition, Shaywitz (1989) speculated that because of gender differences in brain organization, female dyslexics may be more likely eventually to compensate for, or disguise the obvious signs, of their dyslexia. Therefore, it is possible that the females I approached received less attention and help in childhood, but somehow managed to cope on their own, and because of this are more likely to attempt to hide their dyslexia, feel more shame, feel used and objectified by past experiences with researchers, or fear consequences in their jobs should they be recognized.

As was discussed in the Review of Literature, dyslexia is not strictly a biological condition (Frith, 1997; Hatcher, et al, 1994), but rather is the interaction of variations in brain organization, the culture (language) in which the individual lives and the teaching of reading. Therefore gender and cultural differences would necessarily affect the experiences (Fink, 1998). This study does not include the experiences of female dyslexic ceramists, which is a significant gap that should be remedied by other studies.

Ethics:

Although the interview subjects who did participate in my study are Caucasian, male, heterosexual and middle-aged, people who have reason to feel powerful and expect fairness, I still worried about their safety in this study. Because of the past negative consequences of a learning disability (Gilchrist, 1997; Edwards, 1994; Ziminsky, 1993; Smith, 1991), I expected that at some point all the subjects had felt powerless and I was determined not to replicate this situation. The ethical considerations of this study were intended to preserve the subjects' control over their collaboration with this study. Therefore the design of the ethics of this study became as much a part of the research as is the data collected, and I am absolutely convinced that the data would have been different if the participant had felt less respected and in control.

A dyslexic individual's experiences may be painful, traumatic or involve sensitive material. Lee (1993) defines sensitive research as containing "potential costs to those involved in the research..." because the areas of research are "private, stressful or sacred" (p. 4). My study fits into this definition both as

private and potentially stressful. Trust was essential. Other than the strategies described in the Consent Form enclosed in the Appendices, I informed the interviewees that I am dyslexic, although I did not tell them anything about my own experiences until later. I was very concerned that the interview be as stress-free as possible for the interviewees and not a scab-picking exercise. The individuals who participated chose to allow their identities to be known because they are so successful in their careers that they believe that knowing who they are and what they went through would inspire both teachers and young dyslexics.

Chapter III: The Interviews

The Only Teacher

The heading for this chapter is derived from a statement made by George Bernard Shaw, which ran continually through my mind during the taping of the interviews: “Art is the only teacher, except torture.”

This chapter contains the edited transcripts from the qualitative interviews that I conducted between May and September 2000 with seven highly successful dyslexic ceramic artists. These artists’ interviews are placed in reverse alphabetical order and within groups. Greg Wenz, Michael Sherrill and Alan Bennett are the entrepreneurial artists; Randy Schmidt (an important teacher for Alan Bennett), and John Gill are the university teacher-artists. Les Manning and Don Rietz divide their time between teaching workshops and making and selling their artwork through galleries. The median age was 53.14 years, with the youngest 44 years and the eldest 72. They are from New York, North Carolina and Arizona and Ontario. Whenever possible, these interviews occurred face to face at the interviewee’s home or studio. In two cases, however, the entire interview was conducted over the telephone. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The original, unedited transcripts are each at least three times the length of the edited versions that follow. Editing the interviews for relevance to the subject, conciseness and clarity sometimes involved summarizing or rearranging the sequencing of the narratives. I have indicated where I have omitted text by using “...”. Where I have replaced words, I signaled this with “...” and square

parentheses “[]”. As described earlier, in order to ensure an accurate representation of the interviewee's thoughts or the events of their lives, I returned the first draft of the edited transcript to the interviewee for corrections and comments. Primarily, the artists' editing concerns were focused on the quality of the prose and avoidance of harm to a third party. Drafts were exchanged until the interviewee expressed satisfaction. Thus, these interviews were collaborations that occurred over a period of several months. Following each interview is a brief summary of the artist's narrative.

Most of the interviewees were known to me professionally prior to our first meeting or interview session. Because I am also a ceramic artist, I have read articles by and about these artists, known their students, attended their workshops, exhibitions and lectures. In addition, five of the interviewees are fellow members of the *National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts* (NCECA), an extremely large international confederation of individuals who have a professional interest in the field of ceramics: ceramic artists, teachers, students with career goals involving the ceramic arts, and suppliers of tools, materials, literature and equipment. Although I was well aware of the subjects' professional reputations prior to beginning this research project, I was unaware of their struggles with learning disabilities. Through informal conversations and word-of-mouth over two years, I came to learn of this other aspect of their lives, generating candidates for this study.

As mentioned before, informal, untaped conversations took place with each of the artists prior to the audiotaped interviews. In addition to describing my

study, I also made the artists aware of my background as a compensated dyslexic ceramic sculptor. My background as a ceramist proved very important to the job of editing the transcripts because I understand the specialized vocabulary, references and concerns intrinsic to the field. However, my identity as a compensated dyslexic proved far more important to the artists' feelings of safety, as I was later told independently by four of the artists. I believe that these pre-sessions, as well as the control that the subjects retained over the interviews, were absolutely essential to the quality of honesty, mutual trust and respect evident in these interviews.

The artists who participated in this study were primarily motivated by a desire to pass on a message of hope to younger dyslexics. They did not receive honoraria, nor were they reimbursed in any material way for the time they spent with me. For those entrepreneurial artists, especially, this was a generous gift for which I felt humbled. In addition, several of the artists graciously invited me to stay with their families, introduced me to their friends and generally showed me around during the interview sessions.

I include in this section my own account, written prior to conducting these interviews, of my experiences with art and dyslexia. I do this in order to make available my own perspective in this study. In addition, prior to each interview, I include a short explanation of the interviewee's inclusion in this study in terms of professional success. For artist-teachers, this usually involves a resume of publications, exhibitions, employment at a prestigious educational institution and artworks in public collections. The entrepreneurial artists' resumes may include

publications, exhibitions and collections, but may also consist of making a living by selling their art and recommendations from peers. Older artists generally have lengthier resumes than younger ones.

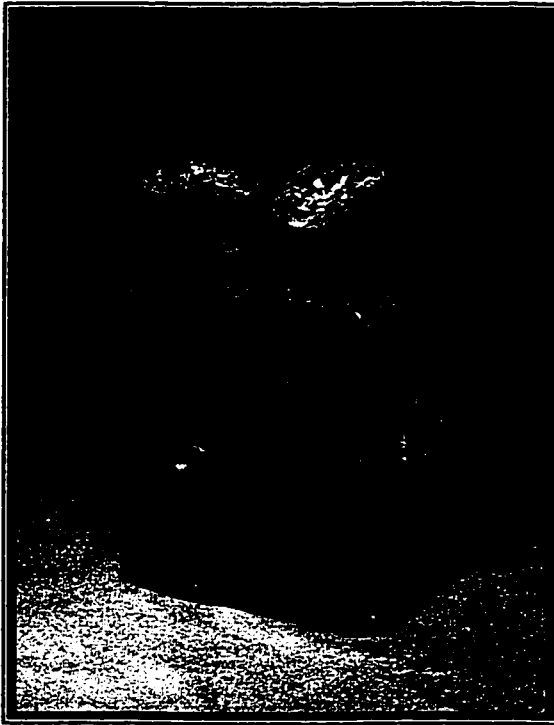


Figure 1: Constant Albertson, terra cotta, *Altar*, 22"x14"x14"

My story:

I am a compensated, dyslexic ceramic artist. By compensated, I mean that I derive great pleasure from words, both written and spoken. Upon reflection, I know I have always loved words. I simply did not have normal access to the written word until I was twelve. As a small child, I loved narratives and would beg all adults for a story. It did not matter if the story they told me was improvised on the spot or read to me from a book. However, I soon noticed that the book stories were usually more lush and beautiful. When my parents had guests, which was often, I was permitted to listen to the conversation, if I sat in full view and kept silent. The conversations were about history, politics, religion and literature. Few conversations did not eventually erupt into passionate arguments, so I knew early on that words mattered a great deal. Guests in our house were often my father's graduate students or fellow American history faculty members. If I interrupted, even once, I was sent out of the room. However if I timed it right, I could question my parents after the guests had departed and they would explain

the conversation. So I would sit with a doll or some paper and crayons, and listen, memorizing the words and gestures.

Both of my parents and my older brother were 'print-aholics'; all walls, except those with paintings or windows, were filled from floor to ceiling with overflowing bookcases. I yearned to go to school and learn to read. My brother was brilliant in school and no one imagined that I would be different.

However, it went unnoticed far longer than would be expected that I was not learning to read. If a passage had been read to me before, I could repeat it word for word, using the pictures as prompts. I memorized passages readily and guessed with fair accuracy. Initially if I watched and listened carefully, picked out the few words I could recognize, I could usually comprehend enough to throw my parents and teachers off the scent. Knowing that only the very stupid could not read, I put a great deal of effort into seeming literate. Later, it was thought that I was being stubborn, 'acting out' as they say now, because of my parents' failing marriage—that I was somehow intentionally, spitefully rejecting their world view.

After the divorce, I was what they called a 'latch key' child. I could go and come as I choose, but I had to let my mother know where I was and when I'd be home. By this time, I had failed the fourth grade and everyone knew that I could not write a comprehensible sentence. Yet from an early age I could render well, spending many hours drawing my surroundings, my friends and pets, of which I always had a huge and eclectic quantity. Although when I drew, I was lost to time and sadness, I also drew to convey specific information. I figured out that I could draw a 'note' telling my mother where I was going and when I intended to

return. Part of the drawing would show our apartment building with two girls, my friend and me with our hair flying, jumping rope. I was not very good at telling time, but I could show the cats sitting around their empty food bowls glaring at the refrigerator, waiting for me to feed them. From this, my mother would know that I was outside playing with Tammy and would be back in time to feed the cats.

Fifth grade was the worst; everything went wrong that year. I had unusually sadistic French and math teachers who ridiculed me daily. I became more and more withdrawn both at home and at school. Towards the end of the school year, there was one incident in particular with my math teacher; I cannot now remember what it was. It took my mother a week to coax it out of me, but she met with the principal hours after she got the story. Neither the teacher, nor I returned to that school the following fall. Oddly, I would have felt very guilty if I had thought that her abrupt dismissal was on my account.

Years later, my mother told me how worried she had been about my reading and writing, and how many experts she had consulted, each with less insight than the next. To this day, I have no idea how she managed to keep calm. I have only a vague memory of sight and hearing tests, and meeting white coated-doctors who asked me questions about my right and left hands. My mother accepted my note-drawings with impeccable grace, introduced me to any artists she met and encouraged me to go to galleries and museums. When she could afford it, she sent me to children's art classes run by the Corcoran School of Art where we lived in Washington, DC.

I do remember peculiar irregularities in my performance in school. I remember my almost uniformly abysmal grades, except in music and art, but I also remember that I received the highest score in my school on some kind of elementary aptitude test in science. A teacher was very quick to point this out as evidence that I would someday do much better. I clung to this scrap of hope far more tightly than anyone knew. I tried to make it appear that I did not care how I did, or what others thought. I do remember that the test, for once, evaluated something I could do well. I loved stories and if I could break the code, my ability to reason was unhampered. This test was about amphibians, a word I knew; I was very fond of frogs.

It was not until I was twelve in the sixth grade that several factors converged, making it possible for me begin to approach my 'potential.' I was sent to a parochial school with small classes and a strong emphasis on reading, rhetoric and composition. Within this highly traditional school, my English teacher was wonderfully eccentric and playful. He taught us how to diagram sentences, but could never resist an opportunity to make a pun, or sing to us a newly composed song about relative pronouns. I soon became a whiz in grammar and this was the first time I felt at all intelligent since I had started school.

I also began to go to a private tutor for an hour and a half, every day for one year, primarily working on phonics. This teacher realized that I would forget nothing if she told me a story: spelling lessons became poetry lessons, Greek and Roman mythology and the history of the movements of peoples. We read,

very slowly at first, from literature containing ideas that challenged and excited me, initially about animals and famous artists, but my tutor soon realized that I loved fiction best.

My tutor, who was a slightly cranky, retired special education teacher, always treated me respectfully as an intelligent, rational young lady who could accept what she taught or not. It was unambiguous that if I did not want to learn, I should not waste her time. In a sense, she forced me to make a clear and solid decision about my own willingness to participate in my future. I have always been stubborn, hard-headed some would say, and since I chose to continue, I had no excuse to reserve any effort. I had learned early that it did not feel like failure if I had not really tried. I had been stuck in a situation in which failing hurt worse the more effort that I invested. My tutor's attitude worked well because I gained necessary skills at the same time that I was forced to admit that I cared.

Although I liked my tutor very much, I did not love the additional work. I would go directly from school to my tutor and then straight home to do a long stretch of homework, since my school was rigorous. Yet I recognized that something good was happening. I had been thoroughly sick of my poor performance and I was willing to sacrifice anything to change my life. My friends never teased me about my tutor. In fact, they were all high-achievers and actively approved of my new interest in academics. Because of all this support, in one year my reading age went from the middle of the second grade to the third month of the twelfth grade. My math scores were also now above grade level.

My grades began to rise also, although at a more stately pace. I still did not quite believe that I could do the work and it was my habit with school assignments to give up easily. However I read everything I could get my hands on, which in my household was substantial. I could escape my unhappy life through the stories I read and in my artwork, creating an alternate reality of my own. It was not until a good friend and classmate, who was sincerely baffled about my casual attitude towards grades, scolded me about my B's and C's that I began to imagine that I could do better. To my own astonishment, my grades climbed rapidly.

I applied for and was accepted into a very rigorous Catholic preparatory school. I do not think my grades warranted acceptance, several Catholic girls from my class with superior grades had not been accepted. However during the interview, the head mistress pointed out a couple of B's on my report card. In reply to her question about why my grades were not higher, I stated simply that I was not trying enough. She certainly knew that I was not Catholic, and probably that I was dyslexic, but I think that she thought that I had character because I would not excuse my spotty performance. I believed at the time that she had taken a chance with me and I was determined not to disappoint her.

Since I was not Catholic, nor had any inclination towards Christianity, I felt doubly honor-bound to justify the faith she had shown in me. For the most part, I had excellent, exciting teachers and I worked with a grim seriousness that was probably not altogether healthy. Consequently by the second year of high school, I earned first honors every semester and began taking honor's level

courses. I took biology, instead of art, because that is what the top half of the class did, but I disliked my teacher who remarked: "You read too much, ask too many questions and have too much imagination." In retrospect, I do not know why this hurt me so much, but after that I had no interest in science and took as much art as I was allowed. I was soon viewed as the school 'artist' and became the art editor of the school paper. My confidence in my academic ability was still fragile; consequently, my self-respect centered around art. I was proud of my artwork.

I was the only student from my high school accepted into a national, juried high school printmaking exhibition and one of my prints hung in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. At the opening, I found my print hanging alongside some fabulous and technically sophisticated high school prints. Unfortunately my simple, single plate linoleum print was displayed in the mat that I had cut quickly minutes before the deadline for submission. It was a poorly cut mat in which my own grubby fingerprints were clearly visible. Although I was thrilled that my piece had been selected, I was also embarrassed and ashamed that I had not taken care of the details.

I learned from this experience that it was fine that the print was simple, but it was not fine that it was sloppy. It was hard to ignore the fingerprints no matter how good the print was. I realized that the world was not going to adjust to me. I took this lesson to heart and in my senior year, I was selected for induction into the National Honor Society and scored very highly on the SAT's, once I started using my two allowed extra pencils to mark my places on both the question and

answer sheets. Just as sloppy presentation diminishes an image, it is useless to know the answer if the correct answer were in the wrong space. Thus, I was accepted with generous merit scholarships into several excellent universities to study art.

If asked to answer my own questions about art study, career choice and compensation, I would say that art-making influenced the compensation while compensation influenced the art-making. I have always been curious about the world. Restless, I am intolerant of too much repetition and predictability, or too few challenges, but coping with dyslexia taught me a tenacity that has proven useful to my artwork. Art-making provides one way to explore, experiment with different alternatives and express myself that is as important to me as writing, but predated it by several years. Working with clay meant, and still means, permission to work in a manner that is natural to me.

Growing up with dyslexia, I became aware of my weaknesses. But lately, I've thought that success in one area also made me pay honest attention to my strengths, too. Knowing something of my own limitations as well as those of the materials, but pushing those limitations anyway, means that now and then I take a few lumps. But because of dyslexia, I know that failure is only the end of the story if I do not get up and keep trying. I had to learn slowly, consciously, how to feel at ease with written words, how to make them plastic, like clay. So I think that the short answer is that art-making kept the weight of failure from crushing me, so that when help came I was in good enough shape to travel.

The Interviews

Part One: Artist-Entrepreneurs Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill and Alan Bennett

While artist-entrepreneurs share similar concerns with other artists, the expression and exploration of their ideas and feelings through their artwork, they also have distinctive problems and concerns. Their livelihood depends upon making products that others want and will pay to have. While balancing their needs as artists with the tastes of the public, they must run a business; the objective is to make a profit. All aspects of the economical manufacturing of products (including accounting, inventory control, packaging, efficient delivery, publicity and communication with stores, galleries and the general public) are all daily problems. Their taxes are more complicated, as is the balancing act that they perform. Sending their work to galleries, fairs or exhibitions that may be prestigious but will not earn money is a luxury that many cannot afford. However, the rewards of inventing and setting up their own aesthetic problems and schedules, the freedom of deciding for themselves which compromises are acceptable and which are not, are precious to these artists.

GREG WENTZ



Figure II: Greg Wentz, porcelain, vase,
16"x18"x13"

Greg Wentz is a self-supporting artist-entrepreneur who is rapidly gaining a following in the Southwestern US, selling his work through galleries, juried fairs, and privately. He says that due to the current building boom in Arizona, he also does large numbers of architectural commissions. His work is very diversified, ranging from tableware to enormous sculptural vessels, animal and human figures. I met Greg Wentz

through mutual friends.

CA: It's June 17th. Greg and I are sitting in his sweltering Coolidge, Arizona studio, discussing his early education and subsequent discovery of clay. We are having difficulty with the tape recorder, which keeps turning itself off, testing my patience as well as my vocabulary.¹⁶ Greg was just telling me about test-taking in grade school, not reading the questions and ticking off random answers, knowing that whatever he did was likely incorrect. May I hear the rest of that story?

¹⁶After the first time, I edited out repetitions, etc. However, it is important to know that this technical problem forced us continuously to remind one another of what might not have been captured on tape.

GW: Absolutely! And I continued to do that and it frustrated everyone including myself, but probably more my parents-- ... any parent would worry about their children....

CA: OK -- with any luck we're recording again. I am sorry Greg...

GW: Don't apologize. ...A teacher showed me a test that I had just taken, and he told me to read the question and the question was: "*What color is grass?*" Of course, not looking at the question, I checked "pink." He asked me if I thought that's correct and I said, "*no*," and it dawned on me that there actually might be some meaning to the words in the questions....

CA: How old were you?

GW: It must have been first grade, so 6-7.

CA: And in the teacher's comments on report cards, they didn't mention anything in particular that might help your folks figure out what was going on?

GW: No, they were generalizations and they really weren't specific enough. I think they were trying not to be judgmental.... There was no real insight....

CA: So, there were probably 30 kids in your class?

GW: 40 in a public school. Some of the classes were large.

CA: What were the subjects you had trouble with?

GW: Math was brutal and English was tough. ... There were only certain ways to solve the problems in those classes and I didn't have great success in doing it [the way they wanted me to]. My favorite subjects were Literature and History.

CA: You told me last night that you liked the story-telling aspects.

GW: Yes, very much. I liked ...escaping the classroom and thinking that -- *"Here I am, I am not responsible for answering any questions or reading anything"*. I could just enjoy it-- being told a story and using my imagination, thinking about it rather than actually having to read it.

CA: Did they ask you any questions about what you had heard or was there any way that you proved that you understood, that you were comprehending?

GW: Yeah, I think when I was relaxed enough, I could enjoy the activity that was going on, a teacher telling a story. I am fairly sure-- I don't remember all the instances, but I really think that I contributed to the discussions afterwards because I did enjoy them so much. I was a part of that.

CA: You really used your imagination to put yourself in the picture.

GW: I had an impetus for getting out of the classroom too,...a boost....

CA: It wasn't literally getting out of the classroom? It was an imaginative leaving?

GW: Most definitely, and I wasn't required to do stuff I couldn't do, read or write.

CA: You had some help in grade school. When was the first time you were aware of getting additional support?

GW: At different levels. ...My mother was doing homework with me every day, so that was an indication that I was having a tough time. And I was getting extra help and then my parents switched me out of public schools into a private school in third grade. Then I was tested. I don't know the names of the tests or what they were-- ...So I assume that I was receiving special help, even if I didn't realize it at the time, though my mother was helping me daily. But I knew that they were testing me because I was having problems in school.

CA: Did anyone ever tell you that you were smart?

GW: No. No, not at that time. ...I think they assumed that I was just lazy... They assumed that I could do the work.

CA: You said earlier that you had lots of friends. All through school you had lots of friends outside the classroom, but you were really shy in school,

especially in math class or in some class where you were asked to do something that was really hard for you. So you were only shy in school?

GW: When I was in a... situation where I felt comfortable... When you're not threatened, it's much more possible for you to share yourself and meet people and make friends. When I would be in a situation where I wasn't comfortable..., I just became much ...more introverted. In art class and in sports activities, I had no problem making friends and I had a lot of friends.... I was a jock who was into art.

CA: (Tape cuts off) ... This is gonna make us really paranoid.... (Laughter)
...We were talking about your ease with people; you like people. You made friends and you played and you had this social life on the one hand. Although you did mention earlier (when we weren't taping, but thought we were taping), that you did have problems with kids teasing you.

GW: Yes. Nobody could tease me playing kickball, 'cause I could beat everyone. So I didn't get teased there, but I got teased in the classroom about not being able to do the work. ...I remember in public school having.... (I'm remembering as we go along.) One teacher would have the ...worst students put in the back row of the classroom and...(tape cut)

CA: ...You were in the back of the classroom?

GW: Yes and how ironic is that when you're not having much success, to be put in the back of the room.

CA: Furthest from the teacher--

GW: ...And the stigma of it.... It was being teased by classmates-- I don't remember individual incidences but I know that I was teased. I mean, little kids are brutal, kids are brutal, and the ones that do well are always going to... be know-it-alls and the ones that don't do well will have to find something else to do. Something they do well so they have something to be proud of.

CA: You said something really interesting about math. You said it about English too, but I think you were talking about the actual reading part of it. You were talking about there being one right way to do a math problem and one right answer--that meant failure for you. So, tell me what is predictive of success for you?

GW: ...Not having the constraints of having to make that connection with print or numbers. If that isn't the case, ...I won't have the obnoxious feeling [that]... I have to go back over it to double-check it. In math and English, they're very structured and ...there was only one way to do it. ...If I'm in a situation now where there are different ways of doing it, then there is a relief. I know I can find my way of doing it. Even if I don't have success at first, I can try it again....

CA: So tell me about the art teacher you told me about, whom you really liked.

GW: ...This was in my first year of private school after being left back In art, he would just make you feel so comfortable and was so

un-judgmental. ...He was wonderful. ...He was very encouraging and supportive.

CA: Did you feel like you were successful in that class?

GW: I did. I mean, from a content point, ...but I *felt*... incredibly successful.

CA: What about your classmates, did they think of you as successful?

GW: Yes, they did. I worked harder than everyone else because I kinda had to, like in sports, I had to over-compensate for the other areas of failure. But I think that everyone enjoyed what I made.

CA: So, tell me about your feelings when you were in this man's classroom or in later classrooms, when you were doing art.

GW: [In]... hindsight, ...feeling comfortable, feeling that I was around people that liked me because I was having success in what I was doing. ...I felt proud that I was actually doing something and I wasn't backing out of it.... I was proud and I was enjoying the fact that I could give these little refrigerator art masterpieces away and they were appreciated, not only to my parents, but friends' parents. ...It was just a generally great feeling that I was appreciated. I wasn't failing.

CA: So, did your parents ever say anything or your older siblings;¹⁷ did they ever say anything about your art?

GW: Yeah, ...depending on their mood. [Of course siblings tease each other].... But if they were happy, if they felt like being nice at that time, they ...had good things to say....

CA: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit more about your adult art experiences?

GW: ...I was a business major my first semester in college and I hadn't really worked with clay since the 7th grade, the 8th grade... Because in the third grade, I had been...[held back¹⁸], in ...my junior year in high school I asked the principal... if I could try to combine my junior and senior years together and graduate early, and he said that would be fine as long as I was accepted to a college. ... I really wanted to graduate on time and not be stuck at this high school another year.

CA: So did you feel like you made up for lost time?

GW: I did and I was very proud of myself being able to do that. I took two Englishes, two maths, two literatures and I had to do summer school to make up the other courses, but I made it up and I graduated high school on time.

¹⁷Greg was the youngest of eight children.

¹⁸The actual words Greg used were "left out."

CA: Did anything happen that you can attribute your improvement in your skills that made it possible for you to do that?

GW: Absolutely. ...My mother worked with me all that time.... And also myself, just becoming a little bit more mature and realizing that no one's gonna do this for me.... I had to do it myself.

CA: ...Do you remember specifically anything that your mother did that was helpful, (phonics, etc)...?

GW: It was the homework.... It was more of a work ethic thing. ...If you can't understand something, you just have to keep going over it until you do. She would not let me give me up. She wouldn't let me stop. I couldn't have a prissy fit and go: "*I can't do this! I'm going!*" ...She'd drag me back, sit me down and would just made me keep at it until I got it. [By the]... 6th or 7th grade, I seemed to be okay to handle my work on my own. But then Algebra I hit. ...So I always had little recurring moments where I needed my mother to help me with the schoolwork.

CA: Anything in math that you liked?

GW: Geometry was my favorite; the two Algebras were no fun and Trigonometry was not good, but geometry I could understand.

CA: What did you like about that?

GW: It was visual. It was forms; it was shapes, and it seemed to have more interest. It seemed to be more practical;I mean that made more sense to me than algebraic theorems. I couldn't connect the conceptual idea of algebra, where geometry was visual and more practical to me.

CA: The theorems are important in Geometry.

GW: ...I guess it was the visual image [illustrating the words]. ...It wasn't the theorem [words] replacing numbers or letters, but real pictures.... [Or] maybe the teacher was a better teacher for geometry.

CA: Anything different about your geometry teacher?

GW: He was a loud, boisterous, kind of ex-Navy kind of guy and the algebra teacher was an older, quieter woman. So maybe I related more to the louder gentleman than the older woman.

CA: Do you think you learn better from men than women?

GW: ...I think in my case I did. I think [maybe]... they just seemed more authoritarian to me and I would have to work harder. But my mother tutored me at home....

CA: Okay, so you got into college.

GW: Yes, I got into college¹⁹; I was a business major because my father said I should be, and I struggled through first semester. I think I passed everything-- I might've failed something, I think I failed Statistics or...

...I met a great woman who was an art major and she brought me into the clay studio and I just fell in love with it. Probably one semester after that, my adviser was telling me: "*Greg, this is a Liberal Arts college, you should take an assortment of courses.*" I was only taking art classes: printmaking, drawing and sculpture and ceramics. I just loved it! The next year, I moved to the residence hall which was right next to the art department and I lived there. Thank goodness I found it. Thank goodness I found it because I wouldn't have had success at college if I hadn't.

CA: How did you feel when you were in your courses? I guess I'm asking a variety of questions: were there any arts that you disliked, any that you liked more, any that you found more difficult, and then how did you feel when you were in the ones where things were humming?

GW: ...I painted a bit, I'd drawn a bit, and I just got very frustrated with painting. ...So, I abandoned painting. I just didn't enjoy it much anymore. ... I enjoyed printmaking, but the smells and the solvents were not very nice; I didn't enjoy that. It was too clinical, it was--like biology, you know, dissecting the frogs and the cats and stuff. Just the smells weren't very comfortable.

¹⁹Greg went to a New England College in New Hampshire, which was a small, private, four year liberal arts college about six hours away from home.

CA: Did you like biology?

GW: I did, I liked it. ...It seemed practical; the information was usable, and--what I didn't like was dissecting the worms and the frogs....

.... Then I found my way into the clay studio and I just found a connection with touching the materials. You know painting, you have the paint brush; in printing you have the brayer, the press, etc. So the clay just felt really wonderful and I felt connected to it, so I concentrated on it.

CA: It was a direct, sensual experience?

GW: ...It reminded me of playing in puddles when I was a little kid and making mud pies.... Remembering back when I was little working with clay, play dough, it was special.

CA: What did you do first, or what did you like most in your ceramics classes?

GW: ...The program ...was very traditional. Back in the '70s and in New England, it was very traditional. Very Bernard Leach, functional pots, oriental-Japanese, wheel-thrown, stoneware or porcelain, low color [brown] style. So the first was handbuilding, of course and then throwing on the wheel, on the potter's wheel, but it was very traditional.

[There was]... a large wood burning kiln in town. So Leach was the big influence. ...I just kept working along those lines trying to perfect the technical side of clay work. Craftsmanship was very important to that whole genre, that whole style. [And it]...was very important to my teachers that ...if I actually wanted to pursue working with clay that I'd know how to

do that. So that four years in college was just craftsmanship. It became medium-specific, clay and pots and technical information.

CA: How did you feel about glaze calculation?

GW: ...You double-check everything. ...I think it's important for students to learn how to calculate glazes, but I would never rely on that. I much prefer a pinch of this and a pinch of that and if I can't repeat it, that's fine.... I'm not that exacting. I much prefer to be surprised by something rather than have the same thing all the time. ...I make a lot of dinnerware and I

make a lot of functional pots, so I have to have some consistency. But I'm not concerned about it. If someone's unhappy because that color is a little different than it was before, then they won't have my stuff. And plus, I'm not a big manufacturer, so I buy raw materials in small amounts and they change composition....²⁰

...You need to have a gram scale. You need to have recipes. You need to have a certain basis, but it's kinda nice to close your eyes and see

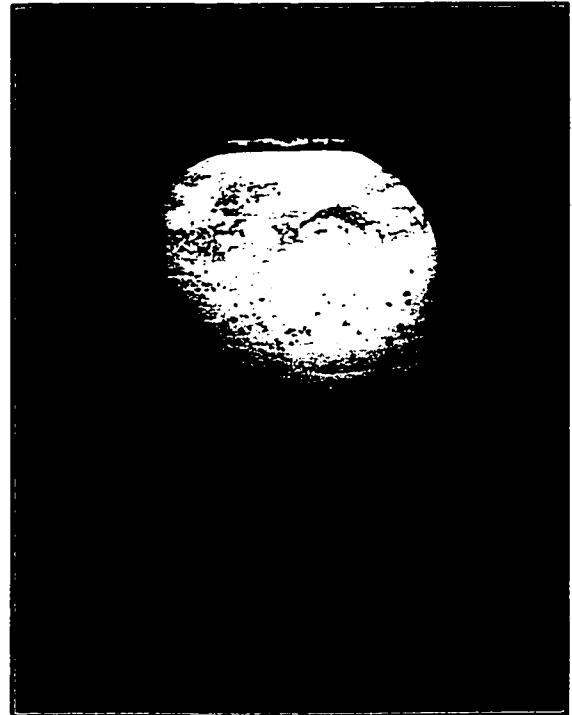


Figure III: Greg Wenz, raku, Rancher's Jar, 26"x14"x11"

²⁰Ceramic materials are mined in different places and the composition and purity shift from batch to batch. Buying materials in bulk would give the ceramist some protection from the small variations which could very well affect the glaze quality, but not all small studios can afford, or have the space, to do this.

what happens, rather than know what happens all the time. Intuitively, it's much more rewarding....²¹

CA: So then you went to grad school?

GW: No, actually I finished college and applied to graduate school. I didn't get in. I was heartbroken, so I... didn't want to do anything else. I wanted to work with clay. So I took jobs, any jobs I could get. I was a ...house painter, ...a landscaper..., and I saved money. I set my own workshop up and I-- my first firing was in '79-- I started making things and I started selling them. I started doing wholesale craft shows and retail craft shows in the '80s. The economy was great the first half of the '80s, and...I would get enough wholesale work that I could support myself... [making pots]. I just continued making things, then I married in '83 and I was continuing to work and the recession hit-- '85, '86. I lost half of my wholesale business.

...I continued wholesaling and retailing till about '89 or '90 and then I just got so tired. I don't know whether I was burned out from it or I just wanted something else, or maybe my wife's idea was that I should go back to school and teach. So I thought I might try teaching. I had a friend who teaches in NJ and when he took his sabbatical, he said: *"Why don't you teach for this year and see if you enjoy it?"* So I did, and(tape cut-off).

CA: What did you like about teaching?

²¹Several ceramists independently referred to this as the 'cooking method' of glaze formulation. This suggestion did not come from me.

GW: I liked the fact that I was affecting people. I was helping people. I was showing them how to do something that they didn't know how to do before. If you teach, it's your legacy, ...showing these younger people, educating them, showing them how to do something and seeing the enjoyment and the passion in their eyes and faces. I enjoyed that year of teaching, so I decided to apply to graduate school and I went to the University of Delaware with Victor Spinsky, quite a character, nice guy, and I was a teaching assistant.

Through my experience in graduate school, I found out that I did not want to teach. The students seemed very apathetic and boring, and the passion of teaching was gone.... If the students weren't hungry and didn't want to learn, why was I there trying to force feed them? I would've worked as a house painter again rather than be a teacher and not enjoy it. I would've eaten Ramen noodles only, I just didn't want to be there.

SIDE 2

GW: ...The apathy, the students, the paranoia of the faculty; you know, budget cutting. Cutting was occurring and everyone was fighting for their money.... So I decided when I graduated from graduate school that I would go back to my passion, that is making things out of clay. I got divorced and then I relocated in '94 to here, Arizona, and it was probably one of the best decisions I ever made....

CA: You came to Arizona and set up this studio....

GW: It was slow in the beginning. I bought this building; it was vacant for about 13 years and it was a shell. It still isn't very much, but it's a work space now.... I knew that if I was going to make a living making things out of clay, I had to... (*tape cut-off*)

CA: The cost of living...?

GW: ...The cost of living had to be much less than it was back East. ... So I had to go somewhere where I could live inexpensively. I drove around with two friends; we did a road trip, 4500 miles in two weeks and I found this little town of Coolidge, Arizona. I investigated it more and I found this building. I bought this building for \$5,000 and my taxes are \$250 a year, so that makes it possible to start over making a living as a clay artist. I decided to do it. So [divorce papers in hand], a U-Haul trailer with my truck in tow behind, I made the trip out here. And then I fixed the building up where I could work in it and I built my kiln and I started trying to sell.

CA: And you did a lot of that work yourself.

GW: Right, I did a lot and that took some time. For three-quarters of the year I wasn't making anything and I was just fixing this up and I was living off my divorce settlement. ...Slowly but surely, I built the kiln and started producing stuff. And I started selling and I do about 10 to 12 art festivals a year and I have about 15 to 20 galleries, and I sell a little bit to people that come to me....

CA: ...Tell me about this passion you were talking about. You made a decision to make your livelihood from clay.

GW: Yeah, a person who enjoys working with clay can't really be concerned with making a lot of money. ...In graduate school, ...the graphic

designers say: *"What are you working in clay for, you're not gonna make a living, why are you doing it?"* It wasn't about making a living. You're willing to live simply.... Everyone needs to make some money just to survive, but if you're willing to trade money for enjoyment, then there's no reason why someone shouldn't make a living doing what they love. I feel blessed, I mean I feel so sorry for people who are out there making a living and hating what they're doing. That would be me being in a math class for the rest of my life. So, in the 5 years that I built up a fairly good following I have a lot of repeat business and I'm forever finding new customers. And I ...like the fact that I do it all myself. ...You're a salesman, accountant, secretary. You're an artist. You're a craftsman, truck driver, delivery person, you're.... so, so many different professions, you just have to include them all around your passion for making things out of clay.

CA: If you had to sum up what it is you try to do with your artwork, an artist's statement, what would you say?

GW: ...I think that my work is from my experience, I kind of react to situations that occur to me, or ideas that I have. ...I just try to keep making things and I like to have the attitude that I don't... think things through completely when I'm working. It's more intuitive and [spontaneous]. But if I had to say what my impetus...for doing it is, it's just my life experiences, what occurs to me ...by making visual objects from it.

CA: When you see a piece that you've made and you feel satisfied, what is it about that piece that makes it satisfactory?

GW: I should have an answer all set up, but I don't. I enjoy, on so many different levels, ...my connection to the experience of making it.

CA: And what about that experience?

GW: It's like reminiscing ...to when I was making it and the reason why I was making it. ...Oftentimes I like to work quickly and I'm hardly even thinking about what I'm doing when I'm working.... But later, I think about my emotional state at the time, and materials if they're working well and not giving me a problem.... What makes a piece successful for me is that I actually made it. It's that I took the time and the energy to do it and it's here now and it wasn't here before and it's my legacy. It's part of my continuing legacy... and people have seen it. I enjoyed the time making it, what I was going through emotionally or physically and why I did it. I think that things are successful for a lot of different reasons.... The success on a level of selling something is important, but it's not the ultimate. You get drawn back to certain things and I guess that that is what makes them successful. If you keep getting drawn back to them and you enjoy that experience of going back there, then it's successful....

CA: ...When you respond to a piece, what is it about that work that hits home for you?

GW: I don't know, I think it's a combination of things.... I'm attracted to some formal qualities, form, color.... [But to me a piece is successful] ...if it's part of who you are, part of your experience. I hate to say this, but if I like the person, I'm drawn to their work... and if I dislike someone, if

someone's real arrogant..., even if they make great stuff ...it takes away from my enjoyment because ...I know the person they are. ...You shouldn't go there but you can't help it, you're human....

CA: Now, back to the dyslexia. How does your dyslexia affect any of this? Your business, what are the pros and cons?

GW: It hurts my business. ...I'm sure it does because-- an example, the tax codes here in Arizona are absurd, I mean I sell to 10 galleries in the state and they're in 5 different counties and they're in-- So for me to do a sales tax return is an amazing feat. Every county has a different county rate, every city has a different city rate and the state rate is different.... So in terms of business the dyslexia is rough, bookkeeping is a problem, ...and promotion is somewhat of a problem but not quite as much as bookkeeping-- ... in terms of literature, in terms of printed materials [tape cut off]....

CA: So writing is still kinda rough for you?

GW: Writing is tough, numbers are the worst, numbers are the worst. I'll read a phone number off your business card... and I will totally switch the last 2 numbers or the first 2 numbers, and I have to read it twice. It's brutal! And it happens 20 times a day and it's just something that slows you down a bit. But in terms of actually making things, I am kinda thankful for it. I am kinda thankful for the dyslexia because, God forbid, I did really well in school and I became a lawyer or I work for an insurance company or something.

CA: Well then you'd be someone else entirely....

GW: That would be terrible! That would be terrible!

CA: Do you think it affects, not your decision to go into clay, but other aspects?

GW: ...Absolutely, it has affected my work ethic in an amazing way.

CA: ...You seem to like to meet your customers, and your potential customers.... Do you think you're still shy?

GW: No, I don't. I think I was earlier, growing up and I just-- ...you know, shyness isn't going to do anything for you; it's really not a good problem to have. ...Make an effort, carry the ball. ...How isolating being shy is.

CA: So the continuing effects of dyslexia is really in mostly things that are unimportant. If you had the money, you could easily hire someone else to do those chores.

GW: Totally. Mundane things. ...I think that [sometimes] people become frustrated with me because I have to take a little bit longer to read something, to discern something. I don't really want to know that person anyway. I mean that's pretty uptight; so no, it's not affected me in terms of people at all.

CA: What do you do for entertainment when you're not working?

GW: I like to travel; I like to see new things, do new things, meet new people. The only thing that I really don't get to do that I'd like to do is, I don't read. I don't read very much. I can read but it's frustrating.

CA: Frustrating 'cause it's slow?

GW: Yeah. It's slow.

CA: Your head is working faster than you're able to decipher the texts?

GW: Right, right so I always play with the idea of getting those books on tape.

CA: ...Dyslexia doesn't really sound like it's slowing you down much at all, just it's a pain with the numbers.

GW: It is. It's inconvenient, but I thank it every day I wake up and touch clay.

CA: You show a certain suspicion for high-tech. I know someone's been on at you about computer controllers²², cut down on costs and donkey-work. Do you think that your resistance has anything to do with the dyslexia?

GW: I definitely do.

²²Automatic controllers on the kilns can insure more consistent results and more efficient use of energy, possibly cheaper too if programmed to switch kilns on and off according to cheapest consumption rates.

CA: You are more comfortable with a touch-smell approach?

GW: Absolutely. I still can't program a VCR....

CA: Our VCR would still be blinking 12:00 if I didn't have a 9 year old. Do you like movies?

GW: I enjoy movies, ...just like storytelling. Everything, everything. Probably my least favorite is horror, don't like nasty stuff. Comedy, drama, slap-stick, throwing things.

CA: Is there anything you'd like to add, anything that you think that we should know about anything from the aesthetic process to ways of learning?

GW: ...I don't want to sound callous, ...but I think maybe the time spent worrying and fretting could be better used overcoming. The energy's in the wrong direction.

CA: ...Worrying about not being able to do something, being disappointed with yourself?

GW: Right, right, ...you shouldn't be so hard on yourself because it's just a portion of your life that you have to live with.... I don't know what analogy to use but someone else has another problem that they have to deal with, and it just ...forces you to choose the type of person that you're going to be.

CA: An opportunity to make decisions about how your life is going to go, the patterns in your life.

GW: Yes, exactly.

Summary:

Greg Wenz was born in 1957 and grew up in Ridgewood, NJ a suburb of New York, the youngest of eight children. At first, he attended a large public grade school in which there were 40 children per class. Greg had difficulty from the first with numbers and reading. He told a story about a test that he took in about the second grade in which he clearly did not realize that the words in the questions on the test had meaning. Greg's early years are a blur. He remembers elementary school being awful and the other children being horrible to him. He made a slip of the tongue, referring to failing the third grade as being 'left out.' However, Greg had an enormous amount of support at home, especially from his mother who helped him every day with school work and made him keep trying. Just before he was transferred to a small private school, his parents had him tested and they learned that he was dyslexic.

After the transfer to the new school with its small class sizes, there were many improvements. Although he still struggled in math and English grammar, he now had art with a wonderful and supportive art teacher. Greg worked very hard in this class, feeling liked and appreciated. There was also literature and history, which Greg liked because there were 'stories' that were told orally, and evaluations that took into account participation in class discussions. This was very important because Greg says that if he thought that there was only one correct answer and one way to solve a problem, he would fail. However if there were a variety of correct answers and many ways to solve a problem, he felt confident that he could eventually find his own way. Greg talked of any activity

that utilized his imagination as figuratively “escaping the classroom.” Being in the classroom was anti-creative, unimaginative. It meant captivity and failure.

Greg also excelled in sports. He says that he invested considerable effort into sports and art activities because he consciously compensated for his poor performance in other areas. Greg’s mother continued to help him with schoolwork, but by the 6th or 7th grade he was coping well on his own. Although Algebra I and II caused other setbacks, Greg did very well in Geometry because it was “practical” and there were images.

High school went very smoothly. In fact, he went to his school principal and asked if he could double up on classes in order to graduate a year early. Still ashamed of being held back in elementary school, it became very important to him to make up this time. It was so important to him that he sacrificed the art classes he enjoyed so much so that he could take extra math and English classes. The principal agreed to this plan on the condition that Greg would not be permitted to leave high school until he was accepted into a college. With hard work, Greg succeeded in this plan and was enormously proud of this accomplishment. Greg Wenz graduated from high school in his junior year and went directly into a four year liberal arts college to study business. His father wanted him to study something practical in the job market.

However quite by chance, he was introduced into the art department and immediately packed his schedule with art classes. Transferring into the art department, Greg majored in ceramics, which he loved because of its immediacy and his connection with touching the material. Finding ceramics was accidental, but also a powerful experience for Greg because he knew right away that ceramics was his field. This ceramics department emphasized a strong craftsman-entrepreneurial tradition in which graduates were prepared to make their living from their ceramics work.

Greg Wenz did not immediately get into graduate school, but instead set up his own studio workshop where he worked for ten years before reapplying to graduate school. He took a sabbatical replacement position teaching ceramics, thinking that he might like to teach in a college or university. Upon entering the University of Delaware, he also became a teaching assistant. This experience convinced him that he did not, in fact, want to become a teacher. So upon graduation with his Masters of Fine Arts degree, Greg set up a new studio in a small town in Arizona, where he is represented by ten commercial galleries and participates in dozens of juried craft fairs. Greg makes a large and highly varied range of work: dinnerware, architectural vessel forms and sculpture that is about expressing and communicating his feelings and his experiences. Dyslexia now causes inconvenient, but minor, bookkeeping problems. However he is thankful for his dyslexia because he believes that otherwise he would not have had the courage to risk a career in ceramics.

Throughout our conversation, I was powerfully struck by two of Greg Wentz's qualities: his steadfast refusal to recall negative experiences and the strength of his will to succeed. These are completely conscious choices on his part to move forward: "I think maybe the time spent worrying and fretting could be better used over-coming. The energy's in the wrong direction. ...You shouldn't be so hard on yourself because it's just a portion of your life..., forces you to choose the type of person you're going to be." Greg Wentz has, in fact, done exactly that. He chose to be successful by working hard, by using his strengths and by not wasting his energy bemoaning who, and what, he is not.

MICHAEL SHERRILL



Figure IV: Michael Sherrill

Michael Sherrill is a self-employed artist-entrepreneur, inventor and tool-maker. Primarily self-taught, he is rapidly gaining an international reputation for both his sculpture and his tools for potters. He was featured in an article appearing in the

March 2000 edition of *Ceramics Monthly* and has pieces in the collections of The American Craft Museum, NY; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Smithsonian Museum: Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC; The White House Craft Collection, among others. He is represented by the Ferrin Gallery, NY. Michael Sherrill also periodically teaches workshops at the Penland School of Crafts and Arrowmont School of Crafts. I met Michael Sherrill at the 2000 meeting of the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts.

CA: July 23rd, 2000 and I'm here in Michael Sherrill's studio in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Can we start off with your background, your early education, family, when was your dyslexia discovered?

MS: ...I can remember early on as a kid, in the first and second grade, that I felt a little different than the rest. ...Looking back, I realize that I felt ...that I was the odd man out. I always sort of had that ...sense of being a little different. And I always had this skill to make things visual. My earliest art experience probably was... a painting that I did when I was in

the second grade of a fawn. ...[It] was a big painting and it was... [highly praised] by the school and by my parents.

...I had an older brother who didn't live with us, who was seven years older than me. He was an artist and when he came to visit, we'd sit down and draw. He'd start with a point [on the page] and draw, say, the iris of an eyeball and draw an entire being ...out from the center. He would just mesmerize me; I thought it was magic! And ...my dad was an inventor. [He was] ...really was a problem-solver and well-respected by a lot of people for what he did. ...He would ...build machines out of his head. My early memories of my father are ...of him sitting, ...going through what my mother called a brainstorm. He would ...sit absolutely still at the kitchen table, like he was in a trance, and think a problem through. Suddenly he would get up and go into his machine shop and build this machine without drawings or anything. He did it all inside his head. I was born in Rhode Island, because my father was up there trying to... debug a giant paper machine right outside Providence. They somehow heard about him through his plant superintendent at Wicks Manufacturing that made the first major truck oil filter in the country. My father's invention was a process of rolling steel where they took flat sheets of metal and pressed them into cylinders with no [separate] bottoms. They just would be sucked by air and pressed into cylinders. The current one-piece Coke can uses that same process. I didn't know that till I was an adult.

Anyway, I guess, probably third grade was really when I started to realize that I was not keeping up and I was starting to struggle. I guess...

my mom knew earlier, maybe second grade? I remember being tutored by a retired schoolteacher in the afternoons.... I remember ...flash cards with some kind of phonics, ... and me-- I just struggled. I had such a hard time keeping up.

...By the time I got to third or fourth grade, I realized that I was-- I realized how really stupid I must be. ...The classroom [was set up] so that the slower you were, the further back you sat. Before long, I was sitting in the back row.... The teachers, I think, were not trying to be harsh, or mean, or unkind. The greatest unkindness probably comes from your peers that look at you like, 'Are you stupid?' And I was smart enough to realize how dumb I looked. Really in many ways, I perceived ...myself as... [missing a cog].

But at the same time, there's this little side of me that... [knew better]. ...I've always been physical and I was a maker of things. Athletically, I've been pretty good with my feet, but I've never been a very good basketball player and an average football player, average baseball, 'cause my hands sorta compete with themselves. I just never had a dominant hand. ...I was probably 11 or 12 before I knew my right hand from my left and I had a difficult time telling time... I could never figure out which way the clock was turning.... I mean, I was 12, 13, somewhere in that range, and would spend the summers up here in the mountains with my father and I can remember being proud of the fact that I had not read even as much as a billboard or a cereal box....

But in ...the fifth and sixth grade, I had a principal who'd ...pull me out of classes to work with me with phonics. ...I know my mother was incredibly frustrated. She knew something wasn't right. She never treated me like I was less than anyone else, but she knew that ...I wasn't learning

like everyone else. I must say, I look back and I had some good teachers in elementary school, and I had some really awful people that just were, you know, just totally destructive, [not just] ...in their manner towards me, ...but also to the rest of the class.

CA: Can you give me some examples about the good and bad? What was good and bad about it?

MS: My fourth grade teacher was ...just highly strung and she just had no way of keeping her emotions under control. She was always ...out of control, ...yelling, and using intimidation to move the class, and belittling. She was probably the worst. But then the best was my fifth grade teacher, who's just smart, perceptive, encouraging, tried to help me do the things that I could well. And made me see that there was some good things that I could do.

At that time, elementary age, I'd not developed a sense that I really was a maker. I did make stuff, but not as much.... ...In the sixth and seventh grade, all of a sudden, I started making everything: models, ...there was not anything mechanical in the house that was safe. My mother would come into a room and I'd have a clock torn apart, the back off a radio or something. Most times, I destroyed stuff, but eventually I started figuring out how things worked and how to fix things. My mom would get stymied by instructions or couldn't fix something, but I'd look at the pictures on the instructions and fix it. She'd go: "*How'd you do that, you little stinker!*" ...I think I started seeing that I had a little gift that was different. I could fix stuff....

My father was always working. [I was very]... close to my grandparents.... My grandfather was the person who taught me how to use tools and taught me... [about rural life]. He knew how to survive in the wilderness and make something out of nothing. He made me ...also love that, being outside, living with the land.... There was [also] my dad's example. Just like my kids have grown up in my shop and my studio, I grew up in Father's machine shop. My father'd open a plain cardboard box and throw out a bunch of scrap metal, give me a hammer and nails ...to make something. I made stuff from the time I was 5 or 6 years old. I was in there watching things being made by big people, and then in turn, I'd use the materials that were around me to make something myself. ...At that point it was never sophisticated. ...I felt like my dad could ...do anything; there was nothing he couldn't do. It was a great gift, too, 'cause I felt that if he can do it then maybe I could too. I think that as I grew older, I started to see that making stuff was what I *could* do. But instead of following my father's footsteps of being a machinist or an inventor, I wanted to be an artist like my brother. I thought Bix had all the magic in the world in his fingers....

So, in junior high I went from being really involved at school and loving the part of school that I could be engaged with (I liked history and English lit, but I couldn't keep up with the reading) to being really disengaged. I got lost in math, I was lousy at English grammar. I just couldn't figure it out; it was just like gobbledygook, punctuation and, you know, [I]...couldn't spell at all. I just could not figure spelling at all.... I could spell the same word six different ways depending on how it sounded to my ears *at the time*. My reading in elementary and junior high-- I was just incredibly behind. In the... fifth, sixth grade, I was probably reading

the second grade reader, ... maybe first grade-- way behind. In high school, toward the end of junior high, I think I probably pulled it up to ...a fourth or fifth grade reading level, but I was incredibly slow, laboriously slow. To even digest and read the stuff I was interested in, like history or something where I was engaged-- it was just really hard for me to get the information out.

And I tried. I can remember it being sort of like banging my head against an impenetrable surface. I could not get through; I couldn't solve that problem; I couldn't figure it out.

But at the same time, there were little things that were giving me something back. ...I excelled in the art department and I was a little star there. Maybe, not THE star, but I *definitely* could do things. I had a teacher in high school who thought I'd make a great actor. ...She worked with me with my learning disabilities and she said, "*This boy should act.*" Maybe she was right, but ...the intimidation of trying to memorize things just freaked me totally out, so I never really quite pursued that.

In high school, my art really started to gel. I mean I was a refugee in the art department. ...I spent every free moment I had at school there. That's where I was working. ...I didn't excel in sports, though I did go out for cross-country, I did run and enjoyed it, but I never excelled at it.

CA: What kinds of things did you like to make? You talked about the early tinkering and your dad's shop. Did you like to make things that were useful or things that were beautiful or a combination of the two?

MS: ...I think it was really acting out a lot of the inner life, a lot of the fantasy. I was fascinated early on by American Indians and loved

scouting. I think it was acting out a lot of that sort of imaginative life, so I made things that... corresponded to that kind of imagined world. I remember I did models of monsters, models for all the monster movies and I did car models... I think I was more caught up with acting out fantasies. ...I was like 12 or 13 years-old; I did a bunch of stuff. I did [paintings and] collages and I realize now it was really an acting out of a response— I never really thought about it that much, but it really was ...acting out something that had impacted on me, stuff that was going on around me.

CA: As you got older, did what you made change?

MS: Oh yeah! ...Fine Art was interesting, but the applied art of making a physical and useful object like jewelry or textiles-- then... I found clay. Clay was just much more fulfilling, because I was very much a 'materials' kind of person. I didn't think very much about how I thought, the processes I go through. ...Now I look at myself as a person who really rotates and thinks about things.²³ But [back then],...the art world ...gave me a bit of a reaffirmation that I wasn't stupid and that I knew that I had something, I had a gift to contribute. I think that focusing on this ...pulled me through the embarrassment of not being able to read well and not being able to spell.

It's hard for anybody to know what it's like to be inside of something that most people consider to be easy, but which is for you incredibly

²³Michael is saying that he needs physically to handle objects before he fully understands them; this is also a reference to Thomas West's book: *In the Mind's Eye*, which has had a huge influence on him. Michael believes that dyslexia is only half the story; the other half is an intrinsic gift that makes dyslexics more creative and productive thinkers.

daunting, just unable to do the simplest of things.... I see that now, and I see the amount of discouragement that was created through that humiliation, trying to grasp at some sense of self-worth and not being able to, not really. ...I always found myself struggling to be heard or to express myself clearly, struggling to organize myself in order to express the things that I felt or thought. Art really became a physical way of doing that. Now that I look back, I know that's really what happened. Art was a very tangible way for me to do some of those things that I couldn't do verbally.

Actually I think my verbal skills were ...inhibited at times when I was younger by being nervous or ...insecure. I don't think I do it as much now.... As a child, I think I stuttered a bit; I stuttered ...when I was reading. Before they knew what dyslexia was or anything, my school principal who helped me with the flash cards, said: *"Do you realize when you're reading and come across a word you don't know, you read ahead and substitute a word that'll work in there and keep right on going?"*²⁴ And I said: *"No, I had no idea."* But my brain was jumping ahead and I'd see a word that I wasn't sure about but I'd pick a word that would fit... [the context] and just keep right on going; I did that constantly. And I had no idea I was doing it, but that was the kind of way I started to compensate.

I had been chubby in Junior High, but I got sick with mononucleosis. When I came back to school, I was skinny. In high school, I ...was able to recreate myself a little bit. I ...didn't advertise my reading problems. I was able to hide ...my weaknesses a little better. And I suddenly started to blossom. I was in the topquarter of my graduating

²⁴ The dependency on context in reading, very important to dyslexic readers, is discussed by Snowling & Nation (1997), p. 162.

class. It was because I just listened and I had teachers that would allow me to be graded on the content of what I'd heard rather than my ability to spell properly. I found all that SO frustrating-- feeling like I wanted to participate and not be able to write it or communicate it in a way ...that was acceptable.

It was just incredibly frustrating and that's one of the reasons that listening to books now is such a great joy for me. I've been listening to books religiously from the Library of Congress for over 20 years.

CA: Books on tape?

MS: Books on tape, unabridged, and I've read probably everything I should've read in college and gained the vocabulary that I would've missed otherwise. There's so much in analogy to literature and what we read in the paper, what other writers use as metaphor and all the rest that I would ...not have got these connections. But [because of the tapes] I was able to... get the allusions, and I mean, *I am voracious*.

Today, when I'm working [in the studio], I go through a book a day or four books a week. I've been known to go through more than that... It's everything from history to popular fiction to-- you know the gamut-- psychology and a few other things. I find all that fascinating; I feel like I've gotten a continuing education that I would've really have cut short. I would never have time now to read; I function, I read, I [even] read in public. I've read ...to thousands of people, but I have to pre-read anything I'm gonna read in public. ...I have ...to take away the nervousness, the little bit of nervous insecurity I have about reading. Now I read in public and nobody knows I have a reading problem, ...or at least that's what I've been told.

The funny thing is that I've done a lot of public speaking ever since high school.... I went away to school in the eighth grade, a place called the Learning Academy, which is an experimental school; I became president of the student body and did speeches-- a little unlike me, but here I was doing it.... But it was all part of me making the change from the sort of person that was really inside of something to someone that was starting to come out. Reinventing myself, finding my way outside of that tight space that I found myself in.

...I look back and there were a lot of people who took a lot of ...time and ... energy to help me: my mother, a lot of teachers from my elementary school, my principal, people in junior high school-- they really tried to help me, tried to figure out-- tried to help me and couldn't get me through. I think if I had had a little different personality, acting out and being ratty and getting attention or being wild, could've been an easy way for me to go.²⁵ But the fact that I had security and love from my mom and my grandmother, and a context to my life kept me quiet, kept me always trying to figure out how to survive: survival skills.

It's funny to watch people that I know are dyslexic but don't want anyone to know. They really do little survival things: *"Oh, can you read that for me? I left my glasses...."* In fact, when I really do leave my glasses, when I say that, I think a lot of times how that must sound. The survival mechanism that people use to save their pride--I guess, getting back to the school years, I feel like one of the things that I tried to do was ...gain some sense of self-esteem. I said it before, I think my mother and grandmother loved me... and even though I had difficulties, they didn't

²⁵ Dominy & Rees (1997), p. 197 discuss behavioral problems associated with school failure associated with dyslexia.

treat me like I was stupid. But I WAS treated like I was stupid by a lot of people. Trying to see yourself as something different from what other people see, that reflection you're given back by others is really-- I think is one of the things that made me such an individualist.

I'm not a follower of the pack. In fact, I've always gone the scenic route and my entire life I've always gone the alternate route, not just to be obstinate, but just because the regular route wasn't open to me. Survival meant that I had to find alternate ways to get where I needed to go. Fortunately, it wasn't through criminal activity or defrauding people, which it could've been and I think that was very possible.

But I look back now, ...and my life and everything that I've gone through is definitely such a large part of what and who I am.... I was trying to get around to the point about communication and a sense of self-worth. ...How I do function in this world where I don't do very well most of the things that others do well, and think are important? The way I did it was to grab onto the thing that I did well. I honestly see things, I mean, *I see*. I've always been somewhat of a visionary kind of person, think visually, visually pull things apart. I've always had the ability, or talent, of being able to make connections between very distant or dissimilar things. And they are connections that make sense, not just to me, but to other people too. I revel in that, I revel in it, myself, and see it in others. I like to see problem-solving, not being just that continuous march forward for marching forward's sake, but every so often, someone going: *"Hey, this makes sense. This works better than it did before."* Maybe it's not the accepted way to do it, but it sometimes can change the world. I'd like to think that there's a little bit of that in me and my ability to problem solve.

...When I came to clay, it was like there was truly an epiphany-- I mean, it was like in a marriage, an instant marriage and I knew this is what I wanted to do in my life. I knew this is the material that allowed me the most scope. I can remember working in metal and painting and drawing, doing stuff out of fiber and feeling like there was this sort of... [finite] landscape.... It was definable, easy for my head to understand, therefore a little less challenging. But when it came to clay, I could spend a lifetime working my tail off doing one thing and never understand everything about it. It's just incredibly vast, incredibly interesting and complex, and it was something that was attainable. It was something that, somehow, I had an affinity for, so that affinity really pulled me along in that material. I realize now, as a grown person, that clay gave me the ability to really do physical things, to work the way my mind already worked. My mind was already taking something, forming it and then altering it and moving it around, looking at it from different views. ...My mind was really three-dimensional. So when I was making these things that were three-dimensional, it ...really started to work. It started to stimulate those ideas and thoughts even more. I never thought about the fact I was what they call a 'rotational' thinker²⁶, but that's the way I've always been. I pick up objects and I absorb them. When I was a kid, I'd get something new and fascinating, and I'd carry it around with me. I just carried it around with me, kept it in my hands and I'd rotate it and look at it, feel it, and think about it. I literally spent this time absorbing it. I'm the same way now: I make a new tool or something... and I do that same process of carrying it around with me and holding it in my hand, ...touching and looking and rotating the object. And

²⁶Michael is referring to the Thomas West book, *In the Mind's Eye*, in which he describes a perceptual talent typical in very successful dyslexics in which thinking and learning is dependent upon a fuller utilization of all senses.

now, ...I make art that requires the same kind of tactile and visual perception.

CA: I noticed this about your tools. I've been playing with this cutting wire and this kidney yesterday and today. There are three things that are unusual: they work unusually well. They're beautiful objects, just as objects. Third, you don't really *know* them until you have them nesting in your palm, just the way they feel in your hands is different. The weight and the balance of them, the way they nest in that little area of your palm....

MS: ...For me a tool is functional art. Aesthetically, I want to get the pleasure out of using it, so I really like a well-designed tool. But part of the subtext of the design problem of a tool seems to be ergonomic, not intentionally. It's just when I pick up a tool and it works with the body; I like that. I guess it has gradually formed some kind of sub-aesthetic for me. When it comes to objects that I use, there are these three things-- I mean, you put your finger on all of them. First they gotta work; secondly, I like visually to make them pleasing, but I guess the third thing would probably be that they greet the hand. You know, they integrate and there's a part of that in me.

I've gone from being a potter, to being a ceramic artist, now to being just an artist. I don't even necessarily always see myself as a *ceramic* artist. ...I will say one thing about my tools: they're designed over a period of time of digestion. I sometimes use tools that are mass-made, or made for another purpose. Maybe they work okay. But then, I start messing with them, and I need to...[redesign them]. As a result, I'm finding out that I'm making things that people like, which has been nice. I

knew that about my art. I didn't necessarily know that about my tools because I couldn't afford to take the time to make enough for people to use, to enjoy. Now, all of a sudden, I'm designing and having other people manufacture them, and I'm realizing that they get the same kind of pleasure out of this tool that I was getting.

...I'm a tool person and I'm of an age [now] where tools have to serve me and to serve my vision, rather than tools for tools' sake. I don't want a big fancy shop if I have no vision to make the work. Basically, I love to work-- the work dictates the need for a certain kind of a tool or process. I wait long enough to figure out if it's really important or not. I have built things, fancy things, spent a lot of energy building stuff that didn't serve me over the long run. But some of the best things that I've done are the simple things I use every day.

That wire tool that I designed, I made one of these back (my original one is somewhere floating around the studio) was made in the early '70's. It was just like a cheese cutter. I used fine wire and I used it all the time and over the years it developed into this sort of stylized, hand-friendly version. My eldest son works here in the studio and we're... constantly reaching for this one tool. ... So, I've made them and I've started giving them to potters to use and they're all going: "*Oh my gosh! I love this! There's the tool I didn't know I needed.*" That's very fulfilling.

Sometimes I feel like my ideas are maybe esoteric.... But for me the core is a desire to communicate, a desire to affect people in a good way, to be able to exchange stuff. Making the tools has been incredibly rewarding there and it's just got me kind of smiling. I'm enjoying it, it's sort of underneath what I'm doing as an artist.... Hopefully, it's also gonna give me a little bit of something back financially. I've got small kids and I'm

looking at the middle part of my career right now. It's kinda nice to have something else there....

And I love tools, and I tell you I love tools that are well made. I see other people's tools that are well made, I just go: "*Gosh! That's a great tool!*" At the core of me, I revel in good ideas, in smart, simple ideas. I mean, I'm like a grazer, a cow, when I go to stores, and go to New York, and go to little design shops. I'm always looking at well-designed objects and sometimes I find things that I like, but I don't like 'cause it's just over-designed or under-designed. There's that awe in me of a well-made object, ...like your favorite coffee mug, it enriches your life 'cause you enjoy the touch of it, you enjoy the use of it. I love to make potters' tools....

...[As a high school student, I scrambled all over the place to find the technical information I needed.] The art department of my high school was right beside the school library. I ...consumed, grazed *Ceramics Monthly*. All the back issues, all the ceramics of the world: Islamic ceramics to Chinese, Japanese. I had an incredible visual memory of objects and visual impressions that ...I carried around with me.

[I think my sense of form is my greatest strength].... I've always found it interesting throwing pots because you take a cylinder and [with the most minute alterations]..., you can make it look settled or at ease and kind of comfortable with itself or you can give it shoulders and make it proud. It's like a human being, it's like a human figure. With the slightest of adjustments, you can cause it to be a different object and really communicate a feeling or attitude. ...I think about it all the time. You can make an object that gives off small signals— *Hey, I'm a proud thing or I'm a humble thing, or I'm a thing that's very comfortable with itself....* All these

things can be conveyed by form and the way an object presents itself or a way the artist chooses to present an object. And all that to me just makes sense.... If it didn't make sense, it came in my world and stimulated me to a point where I asked a bunch of questions.

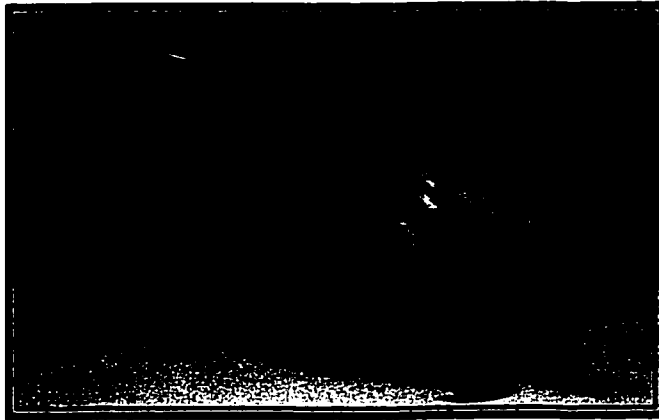


Figure V: Michael Sherrill, *Michael's Wildflowers*

And I do think having difficulty in learning and absorbing information, reading has something to do with that. I mean you're looking at a kid who's a fairly decent ... person. I had to really chip away to figure

things out, *because I had to, I needed to— so I did.* When I'm teaching people I say: "You know, *I'm not a scientist but I am a good cook.*" I'm a good observer of the way things behave and then I tweak, I can kinda say: "*There's not enough baking powder, or it's too refractory²⁷ and it's not wet enough.*" I can adjust things and I have this sort of innate knowledge and I'm always hungry for more.

Out there in the industrial world and in certain people's brains there's... this storehouse of experience and knowledge that I'd love to... get a hold of, or share.... [Some things] ...are not the way you're taught in college.... There's a broader range of [practical] experience and knowledge out there that... can be applied [to different circumstances].... For instance, I'm going into these forms [sculptures] that I make and have to get in to compress certain areas of clay. I started doing something that

²⁷Re: does not melt easily or is heat resistant.

came out of metal-working: If you have a crack starting, you put a drill bit into the crack at either end. So what I started doing was to punch in two holes [on either end of the crack] and cut a line between them. I open it up like a surgeon, just open the whole thing up, just like a wound. The circle would keep...the crack [from continuing]. I'd go in and compress [the weak areas]...and [then] just close it back up, just like a surgeon would close ...[an incision].... And that way, I wind up with ...areas that are physically stronger than they...[were before they cracked].... It just made sense that this material's gonna behave this way.

...I use the extruder²⁸ all the time [in my own work and I teach students how to use an extruder].... [I make my own dies]. I [explain to students that] ...they have to ...[understand how the die works, that] ...there's a bridge²⁹ in there ...[that] the clay has to flow around. I say, if you ever watched a stream or the way water hits a rock and just ...flows around it, ...rolls around it [to] create an eddy..... Well that's what happens [when you force clay through an extruder]...die. ...At that point it's like a liquid, 'cause you placed it under pressure and it's ...flowing. So you have that turbulence and sometimes that turbulence is kind of good 'cause it helps you to remix³⁰ the clay, kinda get it going, but it also creates this sort of slow area in the clay. So you have a weak, or a slow area, that's a very different consistency than the rest of the clay. ...If you're reaching up

²⁸ A machine that forces clay through a steel cylinder (an auger) and then through a die. In this case, Michael uses the extruder to form hollow cylindrical shapes that he then arranges and attaches to compose sculptures and vessels.

²⁹ The clay has to 'flow' around the arm of the die, like an eddy, and then rejoin on the other side of the die. This place where the clay wall has been cut and then rejoined inside the extruder is the weak spot in the clay wall of the cylinder created.

³⁰ Reknit, rejoin the cut area. This 'slow' area is also where the created cylinder will tend to bend because literally the clay cannot be forced through that area as fast.

inside your extrusion, pulling it out and sort of combing it out to expand it, that becomes a weak area. So [I redesigned the die to cut the clay like a knife] ...so [the extrusion would]... go back together [smoothly].

But then I had a different problem I didn't foresee. ...The little platelets in the clay were being laid flat against each other [like a butt joint]...instead of them being interlocked. [So although after passing through the extruder, there wasn't the same problem with the eddy anymore, the clay was very consistent, but now there was a real seam, a weakness [in the clay wall]. So [again I worked on the die design trying to]...re-knit... [the clay wall] back together. What if [my die] cut like fingers³¹...? How can I do that? So I started making these bridges that literally cut in a zigzag motion, rejoining the clay so that when it rejoined ...[the] 'fingers' folded ...one inside of another. ...[It] makes this... [dovetail joint and solved my problem. [Not only didn't I have]...the 'eddy or turbulence' that caused a weak area, [but I also didn't have the weakness caused by] ... the slick area [or butt joint], 'cause I'd rejoined it in a way in which it was interlocked. ...Why isn't everybody... [extruding this way and why haven't the manufacturers of extruders figured this out]? ...I hope I'm not thinking in a vacuum.

...There's a lot of ideas that I have that just don't work, the theories sound good, they look good, I try them and... they don't fly. ...That's okay. I fail every once in a while. ...I have a box somewhere back in my studio that is full of failed tools. But I also have 20 or 30... [tools I've made] I couldn't work without.... A sense of play³² and experimentation comes to

³¹ At this point, Michael interlocked the tips of his fingers to indicate that the joint would be like a dove-tail joint in wood, rather than a weaker butt joint.

³² The way Michael uses the word "play" reminds me of Kohl's (1987) discussion of "giuoco."

my art and to [all the things I make]. It's such an important part of what I do and how I enjoy what I do. I get as much pleasure out of having this well-designed tool as I do having anything else. To me it feeds me back, it gives back to me. 'Cause I pick up a tool and I go, *"I like this, I did this right!"* ...I do things wrong too.

CA: What do you do when you do things wrong?

MS: I just look at it and I...learn from it. I mean this is one of the things that I probably have learned. Maturity has helped me to ...look at my mistakes a little bit closer. ...As a young potter-- the very pieces that I would reject are probably the very pieces that now I would like. ...It's not just form, but like salt [firing], pieces under-fired, or not firing right, or just having problems. And now there's other things that I think I find fascinating, but now I'd try to exploit the 'problems'. I had someone in my class and she was a really gifted girl, she ...could do and make stuff, she was just incredibly critical of everything she did. I just said: *"You need to slow down. Give yourself a chance to digest what you've done before you dismiss it."* In fact, the very piece that she... hated, ...I thought was a great little piece. ...I said: *"...Even if it's a mistake, see what you got there that you can learn from."* Then your life becomes a little richer. I mean even the stuff that's a pain in the tush! It's painful, I mean, there's something good that comes out of that in the long run. I mean it seems like a platitude but it's not. ...If you don't [figure out how to gain from even a bad experience] then you smother underneath the avalanche of this crap, you know? ...Having a little bit of hope and optimism about things is really kind of important to pull you through.

...I would not be here without [this attitude]. ...When I first started making pots-- I moved to the mountains in 1974 and I'd been making pots in high school since probably '70 or '71. I had my own studio at home. I audited classes in several universities and I'd gone to Penland [Mountain School of Crafts], just visited. I'd gone to one year of college, taking nothing but art courses in drawing and design, and that was great! Good people. And I came up here to the mountains with almost nothing, and I had nothing but disaster after disaster. For 2 years I guess, I fired my kilns and lost over half of everything I made. ...The first 4-5 years, I think it was pretty much like that. I was firing salt kilns and things would blow, thermal shock.³³ I just had problems and it was just ineptness on my part. I mean I was trying to re-invent the wheel instead of going with proven [firing methods and clay chemistry].

Not everybody was doing salt³⁴. I really was under the inspiration of people like Don Reitz³⁵, who was doing it all, but [not near me]. Nobody local was doing any salt. ...[I read everything I could find, but there was very little, a paragraph here or there] ...That was it! And no real insight or anything, it was just like, "Fire the kiln, throw rock salt in. " That's about all there was out there.

So, I [experimented]...and in 10 years I feel like I know salt. ...I understand it, I smell it, it's in my bones, I miss it actually; there's a part of

³³The ware would heat or cool too fast. Most likely too rapid heating of the kiln would cause water to vaporize very quickly; the expanding steam pressure would break the vessels.

³⁴Salt-firing refers to a method whereby coarse salt is introduced into a kiln during the firing (at about 1100 degrees C) which volatilizes and reacts with the silica in the clay to form a (sodium aluminosilicate) clear glaze on the surface of the ceramic object.

³⁵Don Reitz's interview concludes the interview section.

me that misses it.³⁶ ...[Salt] was a real mystery -- I wanted red salt, red iron, nice kinda lighter red colors. Instead, I was getting these black cast iron-looking things with these 'hairs' growing across it. It took me forever to [figure out why this was happening and how to stop it.] But then, [in my research, I discovered that the Germans have been firing completely differently, with light clays and I really like that stuff so much. And I began getting the results I liked with lively, brighter colors.] ...I did a lot of wild stuff and I look back and I go, "I figured it out for myself and I understand."

It makes sense now-- I understand certain basic chemistry of what's going on and how to fire a salt kiln to get the kind of effects I want and I'm not at its mercy: "*How come it fired this way this time and that way that time?*" I'm more able to... control the circumstances rather than being totally serendipitous. But I had to go through that to figure it out. I mean I had to physically-- someone could probably have given me some pointers or some shorthand and I would've been willing to listen. I've always got my ears open for those people who are thinking a little bit weird or backwards. ...I love that kind of thinking.

A lot of that comes out of industry; these guys are already doing it. So some potter goes: "*Let's give this a try.*" ...I mean how did they figure out salt? ...Germans were [firing with wood they'd pulled out of the ocean], using salt brine wood. They realized that if they used that wood it would

³⁶Michael currently works with mid-temperature (cone 6) white clay and fires using an electric kiln.

flash the ware³⁷, and if they didn't use it, it wouldn't flash the ware. [So they just starting putting salt directly into the kilns.] ...It's so easy, but it took them until the 1300's to figure that out. ...I mean, I find those things interesting and fascinating as a potter and as an artist.

...I think one of the things that I bring to the table as a ceramic artist is an... ability to know how things fit together, ...understand the mechanics of things: To ...see the stresses in clays when they're fired, when they shrink and warp.... [I] start to try to figure out how to limit that, how to push it and exploit it....

...I've always been a good thrower. I've always been able to throw anything I wanted to. That's never been a problem; so therefore, what's next? I ...became a good handbuilder. I can control the forms, ...adjust... and...alter them. And then... I'm looking at making these sculptural tea pot forms, [extruding the spouts and encountering more problems, eventually solving them. Learning this way] ...opens up a whole new vocabulary, whole new possibilities of what you can do. ...Other people are gonna bring other things to the table and I think that's what's so potentially exciting about-- just that little edge to my development [and thinking processes].

CA: Listening to you talk, I can't ignore the importance of metaphor in your speech. Is this an important step in the development of ideas for you or is it just a way of explaining the ideas to me?

³⁷ Potters use the word flashing to describe beautiful areas of color, typically reds and oranges, that are the result of the way that the flame hits the ware during firing.

MS: Well I guess there's not a thing I see or I'm exposed to that doesn't somehow offer knowledge back to what I do. I guess I'm grazing constantly. So if I'm watching a program on television about something I find interesting, it stimulates... --there may be a connection there where I get this epiphany....

My surfaces now... --they're revealed like the way sunlight affects a leaf in the fall as the chlorophyll starts to disappear. I think that metaphors are important, but I don't necessarily think of it. The whole world is my source book; the inspiration for my new glaze was the reaction to these yellow poplar leaves which you see in yellow and white in that tree over there. Three years I'd walk out here and pick them and go: *"Man, these are just gorgeous; they're just beautiful. They're waxy. They're incredibly yellow. They have these beautiful green splotches on them."* ...There's just not a glaze that I know of in the world that has this surface, this quality.

So my brain started picking at it, you know, tick, tick, ticking.... My friend... who is a furniture maker, lays layers of color [on his furniture]. ...It's very beautiful and you see the sort of edges of the different kinds of colors that he worked into the surface. I realized that if I work using thin layers, maybe I can create this sort of transition of color that really would be more like I see in the natural world.... So I started tinkering and ...[it] took me probably three months before I got my first piece.... And it's become different than what [my friend the furniture maker] did. [It was a combination] of seeing...[my friend's work], seeing the leaves, seeing 3 or 4 different things. There was a connection for me ...[that became unique], not a leaf or my friend's furniture. ...That connection was definitely part of the mix of me realizing what I could do.

It's ...these ... connections that... get knocked together because of things that I see and the responses.... Maybe because of my age and my experience, I've come to a place where really I don't want the work to be just about...[my idiosyncratic] interior life, a narcissistic sort of self-exploration kind of thing. I really want it to be about ...responses... to the natural world.... Because I came from kind of a minimalist, modernist kind of aesthetic, it was ...hard for me to warm up to this 'cause it was a little bit forbidden, you know? But... my gut was going: "*This is where I need to be. ... I'm excited about what I'm doing....*"

CA: What's this new work about?

MS: Well, the new work is about interacting with the place that I'm in, the environment... [It's about] being the observer that I've always been, responding to the things that get me excited. I walk out in this environment and see little things, see little moments. Actually it's what I call them, 'cause I see in a certain form a ripeness, or decay, or fruitfulness, or it's being fornicated over 'cause bugs are pollinating-- this natural dance that's going on. In many ways, it's been symbolic of my life. I mean we've had two other baby boys over the past three and a half years, and seeing Marjorie go through her pregnancy and nursing and caring for these boys has been sort of a subtext, a backdrop for the sort of things ...I've thought about, enjoyed.... I'm seeing correspondence in the natural world and I've ...taken that, digested it and regurgitated it in this new work.

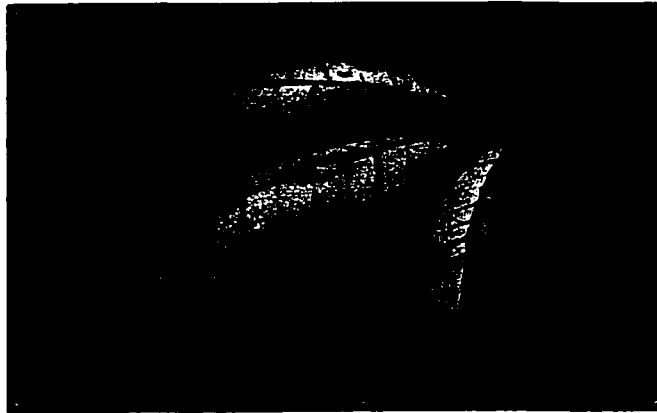


Figure VI: Michael Sherrill, Golden Rhododendron

The rhododendron I've looked at for years, but the past 3 years I've really looked at it and gone: "*What more of an object can really nail this particular place that I live in?*" It's just one of the

southern Appalachian

qualities...about being here that I've absorbed. I had no way of knowing of how to do it justice, ...but slowly ...pieces started falling together. This armature (pointing to a steel structure that although structurally functions as an armature, visually functions to suggest twigs and stems of plants) started happening and being able to draw with steel-- these leaves, [stem-like] structures, but they're not. They are and they aren't at the same time.

CA: Will you talk about that a little bit, "it is and it isn't"?

MS: One of the ways I can probably talk about it is the way I love certain music or lyrics in music that are two things at once, or sometimes even 3 things at once. ...They're simple but they have all these layers that really take hold. I find that fascinating. ... I like things that tend to have a straight forward-- *All the Pretty Horses* -- what a beautiful, simple, clean, clear story--but at the same time there's this looming, bigger picture that's in the background that sort of merges to make this story somehow bigger.... I tend to like ...[art] that greets you with sort of a simplicity but then there's this ...layering that's deeper than just the surface. ...The layers ...gradually reveal themselves. A visual artist can ... tweak people's

mental pictures and memories by taping on many different little things. So it's not a cup is a cup is a cup. A cup is a foot, is an eye, you know? ... Tweak..., make people think. And I think that's what art does for me, ...it engages me, it stirs me up, sometimes it makes me gutturally react.

...That's the language that I feel ...I know, that I understand... [Visual language], ...I get what's being said visually very quickly. ...There's times where I feel like the visual world's much easier for me to perceive than language or the written word, if I'm having to read it. I guess [visual language]... is where I'm comfortable. Moving things around and making things fit, making things work. It's my field of action, rather than words. ...I can't underestimate how much of my time is spent seeing, revolving visual things in my head. I really take in a thing or an object, think about it all the way around.... I mean it surprises me that other people are not that way.

That's probably the biggest surprise:... that I'm a little more unique than I...thought . I ...assumed that everybody can do it like I can do it, though there's a few things that I just don't do very well. I come to find out that not everybody thinks the way I think. But there are people who do. ...You see it in their faces, in their eyes that, hey!, they're getting what you're saying. [Yet] ...I can say the same things to someone else and they look like I'm from outer space. You don't share the tools to communicate as well or as easily.

Now in a mature view, I do realize that I see the world differently than most people do, and that's not necessarily better or worse. It only means I see it from a different point of view. I think that my society needs me and I need my society. I need the other qualities that other people bring to the table and it's not something I should be arrogant about or

ashamed of. I think that may be the biggest thing that I've learned as an adult.

I'm much more comfortable now with who I am and what I am and what I have and what I don't have. I don't feel like I ...need to apologize to the world to make up for any of that. ...I was sort of wanting in places, ...so I had to try extra hard. But I don't feel that way now. I feel much more in my skin and this has taken a long time to get to that point. Every once in a while something will happen in my life that reminds me of what it was like to be totally embarrassed, ashamed,...but for the most part I don't even think about it much any more.

CA: What would you like to accomplish with your art?

MS: ...I see my art work as what I do and hopefully, it will provide a living for my family and for me. I want to own what I do in the sense that I don't want it to own me. I'd like to use and practice my gift just as long as I possibly can. I look at this as a career, not a job. I don't know what role my work ethic has played..., but I feel like it does play a big part because my [parents, friends, parents of friends all worked really hard and demanded that of others]. ...They're very steady about what they do. It doesn't mean they're workaholics, as much as it just means they get in there and get it done.... I think that may be a key element to surviving as a dyslexic person in general. In particular, I think it's helped me because it helped carry me through.

There's another funny little facet of it, maybe if I could've done a whole bunch of different things, if I had been good at a lot of different things, it may have been easier for me at one point to say: "*Shoot! I could*

go sell insurance...."

...If I didn't have to sweat or have such uncertainty about my life, I may have been enticed over to make that decision. But as it was, I've always felt like ...this is the only thing I'm good at. I could see myself as a designer, or as an architect. I never could've gone through architect school. I could see myself as a surgeon. ...In any of those disciplines, I could see myself as an innovator-tinkerer. But... being an artist has ...brought all those creative sides of my life together to serve that sense of trying to find that other-- trying to find that object or that thing that is transcendent.

...The most interesting aspect of my work, and my life, is a search for those moments where you really do...understand.... I'm at a point in my life where, I'm very honest about things that work and don't work. And I think I'm old enough that I actually can say: "*I did a great piece there!*".

CA: You talked earlier about 'thinking inside the material'. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

MS: ...I see a picture inside my head, there's a mental picture of how the clay's reacting.³⁸ It's the same when I look at the surface of glazes. I can really see these thin layers of glass and then pigment trapped and then the actual color of the clay. I think about that when ...I'm trying to figure out what's going on. For instance, I was trying to make this glaze waxy

³⁸Michael is explaining that what he means is a total understanding of the internal logic and order of the material—a total internalizing of its relevant properties and how they react, being able to predict how the material would behave even in new circumstances. This understanding comes from totally involved, multi-sensory participation with a material. He imagines the internal structure, and the laws that govern what will happen next. In other words, it is mastery of a discipline.

and [yet] very vibrant at the same time.³⁹ I tried using various opacifiers⁴⁰ like titanium and tin, and a few other things, but nothing seemed to—[I wasn't getting both the vibrancy and the satiny surface I wanted]. So instead of that, I found the best clear glaze⁴¹ I could find that enhanced all the colors as much as possible. But then I just faked it. I go in like a glass artist would ...and ...sandblasted the surface, pit the surface. But that was too dry.⁴² So, thinking like a glass artist, I just re-polished the surface with emery cloth.⁴³ Just to bring up a buttery kind of surface. Under magnification, you'd see where I'd pitted the surface and you'd see where I'd re-polished the very face of the glaze.I refined it and then, all of a sudden, I've got this surface that's more like a skin. It's like our skin, light goes in and bounces out again. It makes it living, like it's glowing. ...That frosted layer diffuses the light and it carries it out again.

That's the way my brain works and that's sort of the way I started looking at a problem; I don't know how I'll solve the next problem. I've got these ideas that I'm still percolating and monkeying around with them in my head; so it'll be interesting to see how they get resolved. [I guess it's just asking very naive, innocent questions, following with another until you

³⁹ This is a difficult glaze problem. The maxim is that you either have vibrant color and a shiny glaze or a waxy glaze and milky color.

⁴⁰ Materials, often tin, zirconium or titanium oxides, added to glaze to render it mat and opaque.

⁴¹ Hard, clear and shiny.

⁴² Dry: not shiny and colors are dulled.

⁴³ Michael is referring to the fact that this solution, if it occurred at all to a trained ceramist who has been taught to think about glaze in terms of its relationship to food, would probably be quickly discarded. Function and tradition in ceramics can be a vestigial organ when the original reason for the tradition has disappeared, that is when the ceramist is making objects that do not touch food and do not have to stand up to dishwashers. Other fields that do not have so many rules of thumb and conventions are more open to unique solutions.

have to come to certain conclusions.]

CA: You mentioned this morning that the artwork provided you with a reason to read. You were really proud of the fact that you hadn't even read the side of a cereal box -- this was when you were about 12?

MS: I was 12, 13, 14, in there somewhere. I remember this so vividly. It was almost like a defiance because I was so-- school had been such a rough thing.

CA: Not long after that you got involved with art and clay and that kind of thing.

MS: Yeah, I mean there's a couple of things that have happened in my life, I mean, becoming a-- I mean, really having my epiphany with clay was a real reason for me to read clay books and understand them. I, also, became a Christian and I started reading my Bible, and really reading. There was something that sort of carried me over the hump of my inability to concentrate on my reading for very long. Before, I just couldn't stick with stuff and I guess the Bible being verses and chapters, small little bites, that was easy and clay books were the same way. Clay books were small chapters, small ideas, big concepts sometimes....

I read, slowly, but I read...; I read it all. Not that I was able to comprehend it all the time because I started at 16 and it took a while for me to get it together to realize that calcium carbonate was called by three different names.⁴⁴ Confusing! You know how confusing the clay world

⁴⁴ CaCO_3 found in limestone, chalk and marble is known as, 'Calcium carbonate', 'Whiting' and 'Calcite'. This is only one example, there are many, many similar occurrences of this in ceramic materials.

is..... The language is fairly esoteric. I mean, we potters have our own language. But I think sometimes we get so transfixed about the way we do things and the material that we use, that we forget about the bigger picture of communication to the outside world, and that's why we're sort of being left behind [in the art world]. ...We, ceramic artists, are not communicating, letting people know what we're doing and I feel like we need to learn.

CA: ...Do you have anything you'd like to tell a kid or a teacher of a child with dyslexia?

MS: The guy that tested me for dyslexia when I was 18, looked at my mom and said: *"If there's anything this kid loves to do, encourage it."* My stepfather wanted me to do something practical like be a machinist or do something like my dad did. He thought I'd be good at it, but I wanted to make art, be a potter. I talked with my real dad and he said: *"Michael, the one thing you do in life is spend a lot of time making a living. If you love doing what you're doing, then that's what you should chase. You should choose something you love to do because you're gonna spend a lot of time doing it."* When it comes to kids like me, I'd love to be able to tell them that, *"Yes, there is hope, there is a future. Somehow some things will work out so that you can break through and not only that, maybe you'll be really talented wherever your gifts may lie."*

I think we all come with gifts, every last one of us. I said to you yesterday I feel like I have more in common sometimes with the Idiot-Savant than I do with anyone else. I have great insights and abilities in a special part of my life. In other parts of my life, I'm lacking. I tell this to

kids that are inside their problem, that I think there is a way to get on the outside of your problem and not be swamped by it, embrace it.

I hope that's what I've done. I'm not dogged by things anymore. ...My life's been good and rich and I really enjoy the gifts I have and I find pleasure in them. It's been the thing that encouraged me and kept me engaged with life and activity and thinking and learning.

I mean it's what makes me get out of bed every morning, makes me look forward to working-- what else could make you want to work 12-hour days? This past year I've done more 12-hour days than I'd like to ever even think about and it's not the way I want to live. In fact, I try to bring it back in balance and live more normal hours, but I'm glad it's there.

Summary:

Michael Sherrill was born in 1954 and raised in rural Charlotte, North Carolina. As a child, he was surrounded by a close and supportive family and his mother, especially, worked very hard to find the help that Michael needed. His much older brother is an artist and would entertain the young Michael by drawing marvelous creatures that he would invent for Michael on the spot. Michael grew up playing in his inventor-engineer father's workshop where he was encouraged to entertain himself by making things out of the scraps of wood, cardboard and metal left on the floor. Both men were viewed by Michael as magicians who pulled miraculous and wondrous inventions out of "the tops of their heads." His father, in particular, was described as stewing silently for days and then having "brain storms" accompanied by intensely feverish, productive activity. Michael's grandfather also spent large amounts of time with him, teaching him about tools, nature, woodsmanship, and "making things out of nothing."

From the first grade, Michael was certain that he was very different from the other children. He felt like the "odd man out" and was teased mercilessly

about his school problems. Yet by the second grade, his artwork was recognized and praised both in school and at home. By the third grade, Michael strongly associated his feelings of difference with his school work problems. Although he was tutored privately, he continued to fall further and further behind and the other children's taunts became more and more brutal. Part of him sincerely believed that he was stupid, an assessment reinforced by the class seating arrangement which placed the children with the poorest scores in the back of the classroom. His fourth grade teacher was emotionally unstable; she controlled the children by screaming and belittling them.

However, Michael always felt a faint whisper inside that there was more to him. His fifth grade teacher took pains to discover, and make Michael aware of, his strengths, and in the sixth and seventh grades, he began to see himself as a "maker", like his grandfather, father and elder brother. Because he felt that they could do anything, his association that he was like them was powerfully uplifting. He took everything apart and gradually learned how it worked, and how to reassemble and fix machines. Assemblage pictograph instructions that were unintelligible to others were legible to the illiterate pre-teenaged Michael, and others thought he would be an inventor-engineer like his father. Although this was an enormous source of pride, Michael wanted to be an artist like his brother, who "had all the magic in the world in his fingers."

In school, he took another dive in junior high. Although he loved English and history, he could not keep up with the reading; grammar, spelling and math were nightmares. It was 'like banging my head against an impenetrable surface.' However in high school a variety of events combined to improve his situation. Michael's school principal took an interest in him, discovering that the key to reading improvement for Michael was context, rather than strictly decoding, and Michael's literacy improved greatly. Another teacher believed that

he could be an actor and worked with him on his reading and speech. Previously chubby, Michael returned to school after recovering from mononucleosis looking different, thinner, and he took this opportunity to reinvent himself, diverting attention from his weaknesses and accentuating his strengths. In high school, there was also a serious art department in which he “took refuge”, spending all his free time working on his art projects. He described his art-making at this time as “acting out a lot of inner life, a lot of fantasy..., imaginative life.”

About the same time as Michael became interested in ceramics, he also became a Christian and spent considerable time reading the Bible. Michael made an interesting comparison between the Bible and ceramics literature. Both tend to be divided into small, well-written sections. Corresponding with his principal’s assessment, Michael began to read in order to learn more about both his religion and ceramics. Thus the accessibility of the texts and his motivation to learn were elements of his investigations of both religion and ceramics. The art and ceramics texts had the added advantage of illustrations, which was ideal because Michael has an enormous capacity for learning visually. The more Michael learned about his religion and ceramics, the more he was able to learn from the texts, gradually building a contextual basis for his reading. The two reinforced each other. In addition, both the ceramics and the religious practice added an important social support as well.

Michael also discussed his natural affinity for ceramics. He learned easily and quickly and understood the subtle visual differences that convey the meanings and feeling in an object. Now he could express and communicate the ideas and feelings that were so difficult for him to express in words. He describes himself as a “materials person”, someone who learns best by manipulating objects physically, touching them and carrying them around until he has a deep understanding of their relevant qualities.

However, the greatest importance Michael Sherrill attaches to his high school art training was that, at last he had some evidence to support the small voice inside that said he was not stupid. "...Focusing on this...pulled me through the embarrassment of not being able to read well and not being able to spell." This new confidence not only supported his reading, but he became less shy and hesitant to speak his mind. Finally towards the end of his high school years, Michael Sherrill received diagnostic evidence of his dyslexia.

A researcher studying families with high incidence of dyslexia happened to be studying a family in Michael's hometown and agreed to assess him as well. What he learned confirmed that the disparity between scores indicating his cognitive strengths and weaknesses was so dramatic and extreme that the researcher told Michael's mother that college would be frustrating and torturous for him. He advised Michael to find something he really loved and put all his energy into that.

The theme of duality was echoed throughout our interview. Michael Sherrill often spoke about his difference, his dualistic nature, going so far as to describe himself as an Idiot-Savant. He said that he was 11 or 12 before he could tell his right hand from his left and did not read until high school. And yet we also discussed the ways in which he easily understands things that escape others. He perceives unusual connections and relationships between ideas, events or objects, and this he believes is the basis of his usefulness in society.

When Michael Sherrill explains his ideas and inventions, he uses graphic metaphors that seem to function not only in his current verbal eloquence, but perhaps also in the development of the ideas themselves. He explained solving a cracking problem by discussing how a surgeon would close an incision or a metal worker would stop a crack in metal. Another graphic demonstration of his thinking process was when he explained the problem solved by his design of a

new type of extruder die. Associating something solid with a liquid, Michael described the clay flowing around the arm of the die like water around an eddy. There were slow places that had to be corrected. After the clay 'eddy' was solved, the new problem was in re-knitting the clay wall, a problem solved by considering strong wood joints. Michael Sherrill's speech is filled with example after example of his use of metaphoric thinking-- that is, conjured visual images that share specific relationships to an entirely different situation. When questioned, he said that he was unaware of creating this kind of metaphor when he thinks but that he "grazes" constantly. Everything he experiences informs his ideas. While showing me around Hendersonville one day, Michael told me that his favorite word was "ponder," and his favorite sentence from the Bible was "Mary pondered these things in her heart."

This alone does not explain Michael Sherrill's success. Michael Sherrill's major strength is not only his habit of pondering the mysteries around him, but also his ability to create *new* meanings and applications from atypical associations, meanings that push forward not only his own understanding, but others' understandings as well. He says that the prime motivational factor in both his art and tool-making is a desire to communicate with others, exchange ideas and to affect people in positive ways.

ALAN BENNETT

Alan Bennett was referred to me by a former ceramics teacher of his, Randy Schmidt, who introduced him to ceramics when he was an undergraduate at Arizona State University. Randy Schmidt's interview appears after Alan's. Alan earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting and drawing at Arizona State University, Tempe and his Masters of Fine Arts degree in ceramics at Ohio State University. Alan Bennett and his wife are self-supporting artist-entrepreneurs working out of their own studio in Bath, New York, producing a wide range of pottery and sculpture that sells in museums, galleries and at juried craft fairs nationally and internationally. Although Alan is particularly recognized by peers for his crystalline glazes over bar relief carvings on the inside of bowls and on the surface of large vases, the Bennett Studio is also widely-known for the large humorous sculptures of animals and fish. Alan Bennett's work has been shown at the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., in France and in Mexico (under a nom du plume). He is included in a raku book by Nino Caruso, published in Italy. The first part of this interview was conducted over the telephone and the second occurred in his Bath, NY studio.



**Figure VII: Alan Bennett, Red Snapper, stoneware, oxidation,
17" long**

CA: It's June 6th , and I'm talking with Alan Bennett of Bath, New York. Alan, can you tell me a bit about your youth and about your dyslexia.

AB: It was pretty horrible. I would say most of my problems from adulthood came from having dyslexia as a child. The very first, and probably, the most traumatic experience that I had came in the first grade.

One of the first things I can remember were the clocks. They were trying to teach us how to tell time and they gave us clocks with no numbers on them. They would say: "*What time is 3 o'clock?*" We were supposed to put the hands on the clock and I would put 9 o'clock. I got noon right..., but that would be about it. I would get them all reversed, and that was a real problem. I couldn't understand why I wasn't getting it right and the other kids were....

...My first grade teacher had her problems; she had a nervous breakdown during the year. I was a real challenge for her. ...She tried very hard with me and as she continued to deteriorate, things got worse for me as well. But I remember the clocks being the worst thing. The letters, small "b", small "d" and not being able to know [which was which]. It was guess work.... I can remember when it came time to do math, they taught us with bundles of sticks. First, 2 sticks and 1 stick is 3 sticks, but then they'd say : "...*There are 10 sticks in the bundle.*" So 2 bundles and 1 stick, well that would be 21. I kinda figured that, but to be sure, 'cause I got the clocks wrong, I counted each stick in each bundle. With pages full of bundles, it took me forever to do just a few problems. ...The other kids would be done. ... I wasn't getting it.... Just ...[my] whole way of solving problems became different and that's pretty much what had happened to me early on.

CA: Was it a problem with your peers as well?

AB: I think being so self-conscious.My confidence was pretty rocked....

Reading was a problem. I was in the lowest reading group and I was really aware of that. In fact, the stories that they had me read (I was so far behind) were really juvenile and ...I found that really demeaning; I was very self-conscious. Still am.

CA: Where did you grow up?

AB: I grew up in a very rural part of New Jersey between Chesterfield and Jacobson Town, N.J., on the edge of the Pine Barrens, not too far from Trenton. I was born in 1954.... I'm 46.

CA: ...Tell me about your parents-- what did they think?

AB: They didn't know what to think. ...I can actually remember my mom crying. They couldn't figure out why I wasn't ... being able to... achieve simple goals. They sent me to tutors, summer school. All I can remember were 10 years of summer school, tutors all the time. One of the tutors, if you did the work, she'd let you do ceramics, and that's when I first started doing ceramics. I said, "*The heck with the work!*" and I just did ceramics. So I can remember that. That was a positive experience.

CA: Did any other teachers help you?

AB: I had teachers who tried, I mean, they did the phonics-thing with me, and that helped for sounding words out.... You know, I couldn't spell; I can't spell now. I can spell phonetically, but I can't spell [correctly]. To make matters worse, I'm Jewish and my parents sent me to Hebrew school to learn Hebrew. You read Hebrew from right to left, and English is left to right, and that was very confusing. I mean I was at...[a bad] point..., and nobody knew till I was a senior in high school, nobody knew, what was going on. They booked me as an underachiever... As an adult, all my adulthood has been, I've probably been an overachiever. It's a pretty hard thing to turn off.

CA: Tell me more about when you went for religious study. What sorts of problems did you encounter with reading Hebrew?

AB: Well, the fortunate thing about Hebrew is that it's more logical than English. It's actually similar to Korean in some odd sort of way--where they have these little vowels and things, symbols that change the sound of a letter. Just the left to right, right to left... I think you develop a mental block and I was probably 2 - 3 years behind in my level in English alone, let alone trying to master Hebrew.... They were frustrated with me as well and did not know what to do with me, so it was just another thing to fail at, really. By the time you're 13, you're supposed to be able to read all this stuff in front of a group of people and I didn't know how I was going to do it. I can remember that... The Rabbi helped me through it. And his wife used to sit with me constantly trying to help me. They were very patient and they tried their best, but that was just difficult.

CA: Did you know anybody else who had similar problems?

AB: No. Nobody. I didn't know a soul. ...Well, I didn't have a lot of friends when I was younger. I was into art at a very early age and I spent a lot of time just doing art on my own. And then I spent a lot of time fishing. I would fish every day or I'd make art every day. We had horses. I'd ride the horses down [to a stream] and fish, and make art. That was basically my entire childhood. When I got a little bit older in high school, I made a lot of friends who were also interested in art. I had friends that I rode horses with; I didn't really develop any strong friendships until probably about 13.

CA: Really, what happened then?

AB: I guess girls for one, and being in a [bad] school situation... I went to an awful elementary school. One room for each grade and we had art, I think, four days out of the year. It was the only thing I excelled at. So I had four days a year when I excelled at something. That was a time that was pretty awful. But when I hit 13, around that age which is probably a pretty magic age for me, I received a set of oil paints and a fly rod, a split-bamboo fly rod....

CA: ...So you were a loner until you hit your teens, and then you made friends with similar interests?

AB: Yes. I did have some friends that I'd ride horses with.... I would have to go a distance to go see somebody else. ...We were in a very rural location. I would have to go a couple of miles to see somebody.

CA: How did art make you feel when you were little?

AB: ...Making art at a very early age...; it was like a high; it was great! I guess it was an escape in some ways, it was just, you know, it didn't matter to me what anybody thought of it. I didn't do it for anybody else but myself. I just wanted to make art all the time and I did. I was very fortunate my parents were very supportive of that and I had art school, I went to art classes-- probably at about 13 again, 12-13-years old. I had a very nurturing art teacher with whom I've stayed in contact, though we haven't talked for a few years. She was probably one of the salvations of my youth as far as that went because my high school art teacher told me I didn't have any talent. I remember that for 3 years it was pretty awful to have everything else go wrong and then have her tell me that, and my parents too! She said I had lots of interest, but no talent, and that I should be geared towards woodshop or something. And then later, she became one of my students, which is kind of funny, and she denied ever telling me that. But a kid never forgets something like that. It's pretty awful.

CA: It sounds like you had some pretty awful experiences from teachers who didn't help much at all. How did art fit in to that?

AB: Now, I've worked with a lot of kids, even big kids (adults), and I feel strongly that everybody needs to have something they feel good about, something that they can do, something that they feel positive about. ...For me it was art. Even if people didn't like what I did, it was something I felt good about, that I felt that I was good at, what I wanted to do. Even if nobody else understood it, it didn't matter.

CA: Did you have any teachers who ever indicated what might be going on with your reading?

AB: Not one.

CA: When was it that you became aware that there was a name for it?

AB: While I was in twelfth grade, I got my eyes tested by a childhood friend of my father's, a doctor.... He tested my eyes and quickly saw that I had no depth perception. He then did different tests, 'cause it was odd the way I answered the questions. He said that I was dyslexic.

CA: How interesting! And he could tell that from the eye test?

AB: He did all kinds of tests. I remember the thing with the fly wings. He said, "*Touch the fly wings*", and if you have depth perception you'd reach in one spot and if you don't, you'd hit another spot. ...I kept saying, "*In this eye, I see this.*" The eyes didn't line up. Even still when I take a driver's test, ... they ask you where the X comes, or whatever, and for me, there's never an X: just a line going one way, for the other eye it's the reverse. It's a different problem than the dyslexia and so there's two problems when ...[the eyes aren't working together]. ... With the dyslexia, [I perceive things jumbled and I have a hard time tracking down a line of text.] ...I think that if I'm not tired, I can do it much better. If I'm tired it's much more difficult. ...I used to block off the rest of the page. Mostly what helps me is reading with my finger. If I read with my finger, that works.

CA: Did you have any family members who had similar problems?

AB: My younger brother. My older brother was a very good reader.
There were five of us kids.

CA: Five of you. And just you and one brother had this problem?

AB: My sister, I believe, had auditory-processing problems....

CA: Were you ever tested specifically for dyslexia?

AB: Just by that one eye doctor. I wanted to, when I went to college, like at Ohio State, they had a special program working with dyslexics and I wanted to get in on it. But they told me they were only working with younger people. I wanted to know if they could do anything for me, because reading was such a-- well, I never liked it. And there was so much there that I felt I was missing out on. This is before books on tape and before I had an experience in Mexico where I found a joy in reading that was pretty amazing.

CA: How was that?

AB: This is what worked for me. I think it would work for anybody. Remember my block against reading? ...Put yourself in an environment where you don't speak the language. Nobody will speak to you in the language you understand. Everything on the radio is in a language you don't understand. Everything on television is in a language you don't

understand, and you're inundated with that day-in and day-out for months. And then all of a sudden, you discover that there's a newspaper in English and you go nuts! I mean, I used to read that thing, everything from cover-to-cover, and that was when I first enjoyed reading. ...This was not that long ago, really. It was, let me think, fourteen years ago.

CA: Where were you in Mexico?

AB: Guadalajara area..., I worked for a factory there for 2 years. The interesting thing about that was that when you don't speak a language..., if you can't read the language, if you can't write the language, there's no way to communicate.You're really isolated; you cannot express feelings. Others' feelings can't be expressed to you, and in a way I was able [at least receive expression]... by reading that newspaper and finding out what was going on in the world.

...I still remember how I'd savor that. Evenings I'd come back from the factory, get myself a beer and something to eat. They'd saved me the newspaper from the newspaper stand because I didn't get out of work in time to get it before they'd all be gone. They called me '*Blondie*' (I'm dark-haired), but they'd save me that paper and that meant a lot to me, that paper, 'cause I was alone down there for a year.

CA: Did you learn Spanish?

AB: Pretty quickly. That's the other thing. If there's no English, I learn like a baby would learn. I was speaking things, I didn't know what the translation was, so I was thinking in Spanish. But the Spanish I learned in

the factory was like jive talk, so I speak [a type of street] Spanish....

CA: Do you associate any of your early experiences with your current success as a ceramic artist?

AB: Yes, I think so. I had to learn to solve problems. I couldn't solve problems the same way everybody else did. I had to find another way, coping skills, other ways to solve problems. Now I'm faced with things every day that should work, but don't, and I have to find other ways to solve the problems.

I think I'm so used to working hard. You have to work hard to be successful in this [field]. If you're really doing this, you gotta work very, very hard. There's no way around it. I learned to work hard; I think that dyslexia, to be successful, I had to work hard regardless of what anybody else was doing around me. It's no good saying it's not fair. I just say, "*I want this to work*", and I just work hard.

CA: Other than your ability, and willingness, to work hard, what do you think your strengths are as a learner, and as an artist?

AB: I think that with dyslexia... I couldn't go to the books for the answer. I had to find another way.... I learned to be more resourceful [in order] to solve the problem. Again--it gets back to that: You can find things in places you wouldn't expect, but if you're not forced to look beyond the obvious answer, you'll never do that. I was forced to do that all the time [from an early age]....

...And with my wife and me, she's a very good reader and academically inclined. We solve problems very differently. If the problem can be solved doing it the proper way, going by the book or doing the way you're supposed to do it, she can handle that. I often can't. But if that doesn't work, then I usually excel. So we make a good team, actually, with those two different ways of solving problems.

CA: It sounds like it. Can you remember any specific experience you had when you thought: "*Gee, I'm good at this art thing!*"

AB: ... The very first time I ever felt that [and it was effortless], believe it or not, was in Randy's Schmidt's beginning throwing course [in university].

CA: What happened?

AB: I was able to throw big cylinders almost right away and nobody else in the room could, and I thought: "*Ah! I guess I'm good at this!*"

CA: Was that your first time at the potter's wheel?

AB: Yeah! I took ... it 'cause you had to take a crap class to get a degree in drawing and painting at Arizona State. ...At the time, I thought... the hard part about throwing was, throwing the clay on the wheel so it hit dead center: that's what I thought centering was. (Laughter) I had no idea what any of it was all about and I thought: "*Well, I'll do five weeks of it and that'll be it and I'll go on about my painting.*" But I never stopped doing it. I partly credit Randy for that. He had a way of

teaching that connected with me. He must be dyslexic or have some kind of a learning thing, the way he goes about things. He does the same kind of things, as me, with his processes.

CA: What kind of things?

AB: Oh, he's always interested in stuff. It's hard to explain [he gets intensely fascinated by things]. He makes, I think, a good teacher. I try to remind him from time to time.... I know how valuable it was for me.

...One time...we got some pure oxygen and some oil and used the oxygen instead of a blower with a little tiny, oh gosh, an atomizer, and we fired a kiln. It was like a rocket the way that flame went through the air. ...That's gotta be 25 years ago, but I remember like it was yesterday, and I found that very exciting. It got me very excited about kilns and burners and fuels and everything else. I still think about that, if I'm having a hard time getting to temperature. I can always get a canister of oxygen and get some drain oil from a car and I can get to temperature with any kiln. That was just one example.....

CA: Oh, lord! (Laughter) But I see your point, it was hands-on chemistry in the real world....

AB: Yes and he was very good at that. Nurturing that feeling. ...He was generally excited himself and that's what made him an effective teacher for me....

CA: So, that was the first time you used clay?

AB: Yes. Actually I used clay before that, but the clay that I did a long time ago was from molds, when I was rewarded by the tutor⁴⁵. And then in high school, I made this frog, and that was about it. We had awful glazes and awful clay, and the teacher didn't know how to do ceramics. That was the one who told me that I had no talent. So after I graduated from Arizona State, I came back to the area where I grew up and that's where this teacher was. I taught a night class in ceramics, and she had to take the class because she had to teach wheel throwing. We had these treadle wheels, standing treadle wheels, and she insisted on wearing high heels. I made her take them off. But I was nice to her. She was really a nice lady, just a little screwy.

CA: Um, I don't know if I'd call her a nice lady.

AB: She was just really out there. It's hard to explain. ...Most of the time she was talking to Jesus, and everything else, during the classes.

CA: You're more generous than I would be. She could've done you a lot of harm!

AB: ...Not really. I felt so much conviction with what I was doing with the art; it didn't matter. She could not, she couldn't do me harm. She could've helped, but she couldn't hurt.

CA: Ah, I understand now. Why do you like clay?

⁴⁵ This distinction is important. Alan was not manipulating wet clay with his tutor. The expressive or creative aspect of this is restricted to color choice and application. All other formal decisions are already made prior to the child's receiving the bisque-ware figure.

AB: Oh, clay's great! I should hate it: I'm telling you, I work with clay (because I'm not teaching now), I physically have my hands in clay for probably about 40 hours a week. I actually have my hands in the clay-- I'm not talking about... [mixing clays and glazes, testing, etc.], but I'm actually working it about 40 hours a week. I've been doing it that way for the past 12 years. It's been non-stop. I probably do... [the other chores], an average of 60-70-80 hours a week, actually physically working with clay [preparing the clay, slips and glazes, etc... I still love it. It's so spontaneous! You can sculpt with it, you can paint with it: it does everything. The color-- what you can do with color: you can paint with it or paint on it.

I'm so excited about what I'm working on right now... In fact I'm in, like 20, different directions at once right now, and it's very confusing, and it's very exciting and I can't wait to get at it! Even tonight, I'm just about to go down and work some more.

CA: Oh, dear! But first can you tell me what you're making now?

AB: Well, I made a sturgeon last night that I was pretty excited about. But I'm making all these fish that I make all the time (and it's pretty much the bread and butter here). I'm always trying to make them better and we've hired people to help us and that pushes me because I have to



Figure VIII: Alan Bennett, a test for a bas relief carved fish vase

work fast and still make it work. That's like a sport almost, sport fishing. And then, I'm working with these crystalline glazes, and I'm doing that with some porcelain fish I'm working with, and also these pots. I'm searching through these pots again and working with figure/ ground!

Do you know what I'm talking about? Figure/ ground in negative-positive space, using fish images again, but I'm mostly borrowing the images. They're not about the fish, they're mostly about the space between the fish. –And movement, and just things that I think are really-- I'm trying to make them really beautiful. The forms are really full, and the likelihood of them making it is probably one in ten, you know?⁴⁶ So you have to be prepared for that. And some bowls I'm working with.... Crystal glazes, they run and sometimes there's an ugly pool in the bottom of the bowl, and I'm trying to work a [bas relief] carving [into the bottoms of the bowls] so that... [the bas relief] is deep enough ...to come through, [emerge out of] the pool [of glaze],...[like] ... fish do in a pond-- the dark thick glaze, [but not too much crispness in the rendering that would make the glaze break wrong over the carving and flatten the fish out in space or make it come forward too much out of the liquid].... And I'm doing some raku⁴⁷ and getting some pieces together for that. Just a lot of experimental work still with the glazes.

⁴⁶ Ceramists have a high tolerance for disappointment because pieces sometimes emerge from the kiln damaged or substandard in some way.

⁴⁷Based on a 16th century Japanese firing method, raku now means a very rapid firing of pieces that are removed hot from the kiln with tongs and placed into a pile of combustible material, leaves or straw usually, for reduction. 'Reduction' refers to removing the oxygen from the clay and glaze. Typically the glaze on raku ware will have darkened crazes and iridescent metallic accents. Unglazed portions will have a rich black or smoky grey color.

We still get to do that along with the production⁴⁸ that we do. In fact, that's probably what helps us be as successful as we are: the work keeps changing and we keep experimenting with new ideas. We're in a process of building a salt kiln⁴⁹ and hoping to get that put together soon. It's something I really haven't done in a lot of years, salt, we're pretty excited about that.

CA: ...You said that numbers were sometimes difficult for you. When you're building a salt kiln or you're formulating your glazes, does your dyslexia get in the way?

AB: I keep it simple. I have all my glazes memorized. Everything is... in a periodic table with abbreviations. So there's no room for error there. ...I really never had problems with that. I've been able to keep that together pretty well. The numbers, as I got older, weren't as much of a problem. I'm always aware of time. I've never thought about that 'til now. I always know what time it is; it must be from the clocks. ...Early on-- getting the clocks wrong.

CA: That's become very important?

AB: Yeah! ...We have 20 clocks in our house. ...We really do. We have 3 clocks in every room. ...I just need to be aware of what time it is. I work to a schedule every day and I time it.

⁴⁸Pots, dishes, etc. in standard shapes that the artist/craftsperson makes in large numbers.

⁴⁹'Salt' firing refers to a high temperature glaze firing (1200-1300 C) in which towards the end of the firing, coarse (rock) salt is thrown or sprayed into the kiln. The salt volatilizes and reacts with the clay to form a sodium aluminosilicate glaze.

CA: ...That's interesting! ...How do you cope day-to-day with problems that crop up?

AB: I used to yell a lot, but I don't do that anymore.

CA: Yell from frustration?

AB: Yeah, I'd just get uptight, just trying... things get so tight. Probably the biggest problem I have is that I'm excited about so many things. I take on too much, and the most difficult thing has been to simplify my life, cut things out. With this work I'm doing now, it's happening again. I've got to get these different firings going and it's like, well, just one more.... After a while, nothing gets done. Drawing a conclusion to a body of work and saying there'll be time ...next week for more. That's been the biggest thing. As far as working through that problem, it causes organizational problems for me. Instead of doing the little details that make life go along easily, I just totally focus on the big project. All the time!

CA: I understand that! Is there an underlying thing that you're trying to express in your art? If you had to tell me an artist's statement, what would you tell me?

AB: I'd like to be making some kind of political or social statement, but I'm not. It's simply, I'm just doing work. It's got movement and color, and peace and excitement, the work itself and that's what it's always been about. Movement and color, and the spirit of the moment. Capturing a moment and then another moment and another moment. Once it's been captured, it's done and I forget it and move on. It's hard to explain. Did

you ever play 'Play Station' games?...Well, those games, ...you solve them, you go from one level to the next.... Once you've done all the levels, what's the point in playing the game anymore? Same thing with my art, once I've gotten to a certain level with something, I stay on that level for a while. But then I get excited to see what's beyond the next hill. The same thing excites me about fishing and water, when I don't know what's in the water. Seeing what you might get out of there. That excites me. If they're all the same fish, I'd be bored pretty quickly and would want to move on. So it's always had to be some kind of a challenge....

I guess my work's more about the process of making art than it is about art objects, and I get something when I make it. That's it.

CA: Why did you say that you'd like to tell me that it was about political or social commentary?

AB: I can remember appreciating that kind of work, but it really wasn't something that I really had my heart into doing.

CA: ...Do you have any theories about any relationships between what you do and your dyslexia?

AB: ...I don't know: I've been doing it so long without even questioning it. I'd never even thought about that. I don't know. All I can say is that the experiences, again going back to solving problems, alternative solutions, which I find very exciting, and that's an every day occurrence. It's shaped me, who I am, and that's what I'm working with.

CA: O.K. end of side 1.... Back again, you were telling me who you are and dyslexia being just one part of that. That it has some kind of influence on your art, that your art is a reflection of who you are, and that there wasn't a specific relationship except perhaps in your excitement about solving problems. Is that what you were saying?

AB: Yeah! Yeah! I think it has a far more greater effect on me as a teacher than it did as an artist.

CA: Tell me about as a teacher then.

AB: Again, I love solving problems, but I notice that a lot of people are afraid to let go, ...and be in the present. They get worried about not getting the right answer. I have them do some exercises I discovered on my own [to loosen them up and broaden their perceptions about the correct way to do and see things]....

...[About problem-solving:] I'd ...tell them there's a lot of solutions to a problem when you come up against whatever it might be... ...Instead of doing the first or second or third answer that comes to your head, do the tenth answer and see what that, or the twelfth answer, you know, push it further and see how far you can go with other ways of solving the same problem. Does this make sense?

CA: Absolutely. Yes. So the effect of dyslexia on your teaching was that you taught students some of the coping skills you developed-- turning things around for people so that they get fresh insight on whatever their own

issues are, and to push people past their obvious knee-jerk reaction to things. Is that correct?

(**AB:** Yes.) **CA:** Because you had to learn how to learn consciously? How do you think you learned how to learn?

AB: I'd say, necessity. If you couldn't, you weren't gonna make it, so to speak. You've got to figure out another way around it. I mean there was no other way to do it. Every day posed a new situation that I had to figure out, on my own. There wasn't a teacher there, and the other students couldn't help.... It was something I had to figure out on my own.

CA: How did you come to teaching since, with the exception of the art teacher [Randy Schmidt] you mentioned, you didn't see much effective teaching. How did you come to teaching when so many of your teachers really were a bit clueless as to how to help you?

AB: It's kinda funny really. I'd gotten my degree at Arizona State and I always liked working with kids. I never really thought of it as teaching and I was trying to start this pottery in '76 or '77, when the art teacher who'd told me that I had no talent discovered she had breast cancer. They needed someone to replace her on very short notice. My old principal called me up and asked me if I'd be interested in teaching, and I said: "Yeah!" When he told me who I'd be replacing, I thought it was kind of ironic, but I became Mr. Bennett.

...I had the Bachelor of Fine Arts, but I had no education courses. I didn't know anything about ...lesson plans, or anything like that. I just

went in cold and started teaching, and it was great! ...I had a wonderful time. That's how I started and from that I just started teaching. Jobs just came to me.

I started teaching at Fort Dix with G.I.s. I can't remember how I got that job, but it was kinda strange -- taught drawing, and batik of all things. And then I went to grad school and I was a T.A. I had quite a background in life drawing, and the guy I was T.A.'ing for was a sculptor and he didn't like life drawing at all. So he just came for the first and last days of class. He just let me have the whole thing....

CA: ...I think I've taken up enough of your time for tonight. Is there anything that you ...would like to add?

AB: It's still a problem. You know for me, teaching, the biggest problem I had teaching was that I'm still so self-conscious about my spelling that I would never send a memo and I wouldn't want anybody to see my notes. And I have other people write on the blackboard for me and I'd tell them what to write. I mean these are things that I would do, but I remember, even now, it would still be something I'm rather self-conscious about. It's too bad because I know that it limits me, you know, it's a limiting factor.

CA: Have you ever considered telling your class that you're dyslexic--get it over with?

AB: I haven't taught for years; I do tell them, I did tell them. Even so, it's still a thing that, you know, I think it's made me, in this odd sort of way, very much of a perfectionist. You wouldn't know it to look at anything that I'm doing, but if you're around me, in an odd sort of way, you'd see it. I

probably drive my wife crazy with it -- I'm a slob in everything else, but my work-- it's very spontaneous-- but in the spontaneity, I'm a perfectionist and it has to be a certain way.

CA: It has to be right.

AB: It has to be right...

CA: This is a second interview with Alan Bennett in his studio in Bath, NY. He's also attempting to load his kiln while we talk. Do you have anything to add about what your work is about.

AB: ...It's funny to be talking about it when we were on the phone and it's different to be [talking, both standing] right in the middle of it.... This work is definitely about movement, no doubt about it. It's about color and movement, and it's about my own safe world or whatever it is that I do. ...You're in a room full of characters. I guess I like a crowd.

CA: (Laughter) Well, I can see that there's definitely a sense of humor at play here.

AB: ...A lot of humor, and some stuff that isn't funny too. Some of these fish are pretty paranoid. It's funny and it's *not* funny, but then it's funny again. I think it's funny -- if that makes sense?

But they still move whether they're funny or not, they still move in a way that I find appealing and the one that's finished-- the color I worked



Figure IX: Alan Bennett, stoneware, oxidation fired

into him [adds to the movement of the piece]. At first in school, I studied painting and color is still a very big part of what these are about.

CA: For a 'potter' glaze calculation is a major part of color. We touched on it over the phone, but now that I see your work I can see how much you use glaze chemistry. I mean, this is something you *KNOW*.

AB: I gotta be careful. (Laughter) I love color and texture and depth. Glaze--glaze will do that. You really can't get in painting the same quality that you can with glaze-- it's has depth that's very exciting. I don't know what it's like not to have dyslexia, so it's hard to answer some of those questions. I know that people around me, while I was working, how they dealt with solving glaze problems. They didn't seem to have to be as careful as I had to be, and I'm not a careful person, really. I like to let it hang out there; it's fun. I like to live that way. But when it comes to my glaze formulas, I am very careful and this is so stimulating just--

...First of all I like to try to come up with these pallets of color⁵⁰ because I don't want to be hemmed in by my own limitations. I want to be able to have any color I want when I approach a piece. This test that I have in my hand is actually a total failure, but it just happened to be the closest one.... There's a salmon [color] around here somewhere. These are roses [pinks]. Test tiles. I prefer to do test tiles with my wife because she does things I would never think of with combinations of glaze. So I just plead with her just to take the test glazes and do something with them and I take notes. Some of my best ideas I've gotten from her. And she

⁵⁰Alan is referring to a 'line' test, a very methodical testing method in which only one material in a glaze is minutely altered at a time. This results in the development of many glazes from one parent glaze.

didn't know really what she was doing, but she always has a intuitive sense about her approach to glaze calc⁵¹-- it's more intuitive and it sounds kind of odd but it works. I take that and I'm able to use my method in conjunction with hers and come up with some really incredible stuff-- we work well together.

CA: Do you use empirical formulas?

AB: Oh God! We're getting back to the glaze calc in numbers, the chemistry of it all. It's non-stop; I will sit at night with my little pads of paper. It's funny, I lose a lot of things, I obviously am not careful enough. I let this glaze drip into this kiln⁵² but I kept all my glaze books⁵³ since [I was a student of] Randy Schmidt's class back in '74. Those books are my treasures really and I have spent thousand of hours compiling that information. It's a continuing process. ...[I looked at pieces I liked], started tweaking the formulas and looking at other formulas.⁵⁴ I used to like doing a hundred tests at a time. As far as the dyslexia goes, I don't

⁵¹Common slang for calculation

⁵²Just prior to beginning this interview session, Alan had discovered that a glaze had run in his last firing, destroying several soft bricks (expensive, fragile, high heat insulating—or refractory—lightweight bricks) at the bottom of his kiln. Before beginning our interview, we cleaned up the mess, dug the dripped glaze out of the bricks, using various unorthodox implements, such as a large kitchen spoon. We both found this hilarious, but darkly so—it was funny and also very not funny at the same time. It was not just the damage and the silly tools we used, but we both made painful associations with our pasts. Another person might have shrugged and said: it was an accident.

⁵³Most ceramists keep a separate notebook of glaze recipes, formulas, test results, etc. Losing a glaze book would mean losing the details of all the glazes formulated during that period, a disastrous situation.

⁵⁴Alan is explaining that as a student, he would see a glaze that he liked and try to reproduce it. After doing that, he would isolate the effects he liked, and do many, many line tests to create variations on this parent glaze.

know. Maybe, I got real anal about it 'cause if you made a mistake then you couldn't tell what happened. Even if you made a mistake in mixing, at least if you had notes you'd have all the information.

I'm imagining that if I take the crystal glaze right now, if I take it and add just a quarter percent cobalt to this copper glaze, it won't go blue but it will just lean it toward that cool side and will have an effect on the crystal. And if I add a little titanium to it, I will get that halo, or use too much it will get milky and will obscure the carving. And so, in my mind, I'm working all these numbers out and the chemicals out and just trying to envision it. Which is dangerous because when you finally get the end product and you look at it, you might have too much of a pre-conceived notion about what you want. And then you have a hard time seeing a real treasure in front of your eyes.⁵⁵

I've always put things aside and waited, even though I did not like what I got, because I might like it a couple of years later. ...I probably have some tile from 20 years that I still have and that I look at....

CA: What kind of problems do you still have that you attribute to dyslexia?

AB: Well, the biggest problem I have is I'm still self-conscious about not being able to spell well. I was not able to read very well and I felt I'd be judged on my ability to spell or read. If my intelligence was judged by my spelling, I wouldn't have been judged very highly.

CA: Are you at all concerned that people won't find you intelligent?

⁵⁵In this paragraph, Alan is demonstrating the thinking process parallel to line testing.

AB: I guess I'm more concerned about not being able to be seen for who I am.... I don't know, I think a way of dealing with the dyslexia ...was to use humor. At the same time you worried that you weren't going to be taken seriously because you didn't have those abilities to communicate using the written language. And with the reading, I always felt I wouldn't be taken seriously because of that. Joking around about it would make that even worse and I think that that had some effect on it, though I'm glad the humor gets me through the rough things in life.

CA: Can you give an example of how you used this humor?

AB: An example of the humor? You know, just pounding away at that awful glass spot down the bottom of that kiln. That was not the proper tool to use and I thought it was funny. And then we used that big spoon to try to get that glaze out of there! I can't think of other things, but I'm still self-conscious if I have to read out loud and I stumble through something and that bothers me.

I think Rosemary has had to totally take over-- I haven't even read my mail-- not that I don't want to. But we're that busy here and she's totally taken over everything that's written, everything that's read. If she has to deal with somebody that's awful on the phone, then I get on the phone and I deal with people on the phone. But for the most part, especially these past 5, 6, 7 years I've almost been pretty isolated up here. I haven't communicated much with the people so much anymore. We just got e-mail. That's an interesting way to try to communicate written-wise. If I'm uptight about it, we've got the word-check. That's opened up a whole new avenue, but I haven't had much time for that lately.... If I'm firing a kiln and it's late at night and everybody is asleep-- it

might be the only time I get to really communicate with somebody. I can send them an e-mail to express how I feel and not worry about waking them up.... I think that dyslexia, I don't know, maybe it's just me too-- I mean, how can I separate my personality from dyslexia?

CA: You mentioned ...in the other tape that a positive thing about being dyslexic was that you learned that you really had to work hard. Anything you'd like to add to that about the positive benefits that might have contributed to your success?

AB: If you work hard you have less chance of failure (laughter). ...I had to work harder than the other kids just to do equal to what they did. In my younger years, I remember that. And even now, there's a-- I have to work really hard to make this work. I enjoy the work. It is really hard work to make a business work; this may be a crazy way to do it. ...You look around and you see fish all over the walls. How can you possibly make a living making these fish? Who could possibly want all these things? As far as the work goes, ...I can't believe anybody would really want this stuff. But I just love making it. If it weren't for Rose, I'd be in trouble because she really helps do the pricing and a lot of the correspondence....

I love getting to do what I do. I'm real excited about it, but I just can't imagine that people pay to have these things. They do, there's one couple, they must have 80 of these in their home....

CA: Is there ...any connection that you can think of between dyslexia and clay work, anything about how you approach the work or how you think about the work or just your desire to do the work? Why clay?

AB: ...I really don't know. To be honest, it seems like there might be an area where you can get as far away from dyslexia as you can possibly get.

I mean there's no disability for me in clay, the glaze calc might be the only place you might touch on it. ...And I can do it. I used to not even write it down; I used to not even use a scale; I would just mix [glazes] by feel.⁵⁶ But it became a problem when you're supposed to make a lot of things with the same color. They come out different even if you mix them with the scale-- imagine just throwing materials together in a bucket. I used to do it that way, it was like cooking, very much so that the glaze calc was like cooking. In that respect, how would dyslexia affect cooking? It'd depend on your style, how to progress because-- you could screw up a lot, maybe. They say teaspoons and you put in tablespoons or something, I don't know.

Clay, for me, the big kicker, the reason that I just got nuts over it-- the immediacy of it. ...You have to wait for it to dry and stuff, ...but it's still immediate. It responds well to spontaneity.... You can bridge the gap between painting and sculpture. The work that we do is very much painting-on-sculpture. There's something about glazing this thing that I've made, putting it in that kiln, firing it up. There's always a chance of a

⁵⁶Many ceramists weigh out their glaze materials very carefully because very small variations in the composition could have terrible consequences, especially if color constancy is very important, as it might be for potters who make sets of dishes, or need to duplicate a glaze in order to replace a broken or missing piece from a set, or to encourage customers to continue adding to sets they already own. However, many of the ceramists I interviewed described using the 'cooking method', a less precise way of mixing a glaze but one that depends upon a deep understanding of practical chemistry. Exact matches in color are less likely, but interesting surprises are more likely. For some, those surprises are a large part of the thrill of working in ceramics. Alan Bennett's 'style' utilizes both methods.

surprise, getting something better than you'd imagined.⁵⁷ In painting you get what you saw and other things too. ...But there's nothing like opening up the kiln and having-- especially when you've been working towards something for years, trying to develop an idea, one that you've really, really devoted yourself to, and there it is, whole and complete. It's pretty wild, for me anyway, and then you want another one. It's almost like heroin. (Laughter)

CA: Don't say that, somebody will legislate against it. Is there anything you'd like to add that you think other people should know about dyslexia?

AB: I think one really key ...thing in everybody's life, and I might've said this before but I feel really strongly about it, is you have to have something to feel good about. You have to have *something* to feel good about, and you build on that. If you don't have anything that you feel good about, then you'd best look around and find something that you like, you can identify with, that you feel good about. That dyslexia thing..., it can really cause low self-esteem because you try like anybody else, but you can't do certain things. It's not like you have an arm missing where there's a pretty obvious reason why you can't do it. It's something else that you do have

⁵⁷Potters often talk about control. In ceramics, it is possible to gain admirable control despite the complexity of the relationships among the technical elements of (for example) just the glazing, e.g. the chemicals, their ratios, temperature, and time--never mind the application of the glazes and the aesthetic decisions concerning how a glaze is used. It is also an act of memory and imagination as the ceramist imagines how the glaze will work if applied and fired in a certain way to a specific piece. For example, Alan described earlier the rendering of a fish so that the glaze will break (flow) in predictable ways. Usually ceramists refer to glaze tests to see how the elements will combine. However much technical control someone gains, there is always that--perhaps small--element of serendipity. Ceramists usually have some tolerance for this. For some, this is a major element in their enjoyment of the material. In this case, the ceramist is in a strange position, working to gain the mastery that will provide control, while always hoping for the exciting serendipitous accidents.

missing, there is something missing and it can feel bad, as a child in particular....

You carry this baggage sometimes... I don't know if you ever lived any place when you were very little and you moved away? ...You go back and all of a sudden, the ceilings are much lower than you remember them.... Well I think it's similar to dealing with life with dyslexia. When you were younger, things were... giant. When you become older, they're not that bad really. You developed coping skills but the problems still seem giant. ...You remember the giant stuff that you couldn't reach, you couldn't do, at least I do. I think the hardest thing... is to just let go.

I enjoy working hard and trying hard..., but now the hardest thing is taking a day off. Like we took off today, but it's hard, hard to do. I enjoy-- I play hard, I love it! But it's hard to stop once you get going. Look at this pink glaze. (Alan picked up a large plate with glaze line tests on it.) This one's from Mexico. This is-- I'm wasting your tape-- but it's fascinating.

CA: Don't worry, this is your tape, whether we use it or not.

AB: This was before encapsulated⁵⁸ colors; ...that's cone 10 reduction. ...Look at those colors-- That's a really heavy duty reduction. ...Look at this purple? But there it's gray....That's a really weird green too, I mean that

⁵⁸Industry has created glaze stains that are consistent and stable. Prior to encapsulated stains, it was very difficult to make a high temperature pink or red glaze and this glaze would be very dependent on a very precise firing cycle. There is a story about a "Sacrificial" red glaze in which an ancient Chinese potter once found a pot in his kiln with an unexpected and very beautiful red glaze, which was then highly praised by the emperor. Repeated experiments and firings later, the overly-intense potter still could not repeat the glaze until in deep despair he flung himself into the kiln, both killing himself and reducing (starving oxygen from the kiln atmosphere) the kiln at an opportune time. When the kiln cooled down enough to open, the potter's apprentice found a kiln full of red glazed pots. So potters get very excited about dependable high temperature reds and pinks made without the new encapsulated colors.

cone 10 reduction-- that green, I have never seen it, I mean in the States, anywhere.

CA: There's some texture to it too, satin-dry, almost buttery. Yeah, you were doing some pretty extraordinary stuff in Mexico.

AB: It was fun to get that opportunity. It was wonderful! ...What a wonderful thing to have that experience to get an opportunity to go down and spend two years and work with another culture, ...a whole wonderful group of people. I was able to give them, hopefully, not bad stuff. And they gave me so much more in return. I introduced this color and I was afraid to give them that pink. I knew they'd go nuts over it down there and I told them that this is ...an accent color. If you use too much, it's gonna be like eating icing and no cake. I tried to explain it that way and I went back and visited some years later and the whole town was pink! And I went, "OOOH!"All the factories had it Oh! God, I've ruined the town.

CA: That was you?

Summary:

Alan Bennett was born in 1954, one of five children in a rural area in New Jersey where he loved to fish, ride horses and make art. Two of his siblings also likely have some kind of learning disability. From the first grade, Alan encountered problems in school. He reversed numbers and letters, and had particular difficulty learning how to tell time. He was painfully aware that all the other children could complete tasks that he found unfathomable. This story was told as an example of how very early in his life he learned to doubt himself and

his assumptions. Very quickly, he understood the necessity of double-checking anything having to do with symbols, e.g. numbers or letters.

Because Alan Bennett did not yet understand that it was the symbol itself, rather than the underlying concept that was difficult for him, he spent large amounts of time unnecessarily double-checking his reasoning processes, e.g. 'counting the sticks in the bundle.' It was only much later that he understood that the need for double-checking had to do with sequencing and reading symbols correctly, rather than comprehending and applying concepts. Before this realization, the double-checking actually compounded his problems. When he double and triple-checked, he was slowed down so much that he only sank further and further behind the other children. Private tutors and summer school are the primary memories of his youth. Alan summed up his early childhood by saying that he was only successful four times a year in elementary school because there were only four times a year when the children had art activities. His teachers thought that he was either a dim or lazy child.

The gradual deterioration of his confidence and self-esteem made it difficult for Alan Bennett in social situations. He described himself as shy and a loner until about the age of 13, when he made many friends who had similar interests in art and fishing. Only as a senior in high school just prior to University did Alan discover that he had vision problems as well as dyslexia, which may have been related to his dyslexia since tracking down a line of text is difficult and his "eyes were not working together." No treatment was offered for the dyslexia, but this was the first time anyone had named his reading problem.

For much of his youth, Alan Bennett encountered teachers who were actively destructive. A grade school teacher had a nervous breakdown during the time Alan was in her class and could not cope at all with Alan's problems. In high school, an art teacher told both Alan and his parents that he had no talent and should steer away from the visual arts. Fortunately by this time, art-making was so pleasurable for him that he would not be discouraged:

I felt so much conviction with what I was doing with the art; it didn't matter. She could not, she couldn't do me any harm. She could have helped, but she couldn't hurt.

Later as a painting major in art school, Alan Bennett luckily chose a ceramics class that captured his interest completely. The vastness of the ceramics field and the spontaneity possible in handling the material fit Alan Bennett's personality and thirst for challenges. Alan said that it is absolutely essential for him to have more to learn, surprises, things he could not anticipate. Because he loves to set up his own challenges, essentially problem-*finding* and then solving is what intrigues Alan most about art-making using ceramics. Furthermore, he was not at all disabled in ceramics and, in fact, learned incredibly quickly. The first day of his first ceramics class, he was the only student able to throw a large cylinder. Furthermore, he could continue to explore the interests that attracted him to painting: color, texture and movement. In fact in ceramics, color has an additional attribute difficult to explore in painting: the depth of the glazes.

Alan Bennett also had an exciting ceramics teacher. Randy Schmidt had many similar attributes as Alan. He had "intense fascinations" for things and

loved to experiment in exciting ways. “He’s always interested in stuff. It’s hard to explain, he gets intensely fascinated by things.” This teacher, Randy Schmidt, loved to experiment in exciting ways and the relationships between theory and practice were tested with an immediacy that suited Alan very well.

An important theme that ran through our discussion concerns the importance of communication for Alan, a concern that overlaps both his art-making and his compensation for dyslexia. One of his greatest fears is to be misunderstood, having his talents overlooked because of his dyslexia. Alan describes his artwork in terms of communicating his thoughts and feelings using a medium in which he excels. In addition, he believes the single most important factor in his reading as an adult had to do with his desire to have contact with other people. Initially when working in Mexico, he could not understand Spanish and felt terribly isolated. This drive to communicate overcame his “mental blocks” in both reading and learning a foreign language.

Throughout the interviews, the words that Alan Bennett used to describe himself are paradoxes: careful and precise, careless and spontaneous. He constantly double-checks, works extremely hard, watches the clocks, but his work is about capturing the moment. He has too many projects and becomes disproportionately annoyed with himself when small details trip him up. He loves the surprise of a kiln opening, fishing in a strange lake and sailing. Yet he is a perfectionist, who takes copious and painstaking notes and has held onto his highly treasured and well-worn glaze notebooks for over twenty years. He is playful, smart, happy and very funny; intensely focused, highly self-critical and

patient with difficult people. And his artwork, about capturing the moment, about the process of making art, about color and movement, humor and paranoia clearly reflects all of this.

Part Two: The Artist-Academics, Randy Schmidt and John Gill

These artist-teachers depend for their livelihood on the institution that employs them. The institution makes the rules for promotion and defines success for them. Although they have the intellectual freedom to make objects that appeal to them on aesthetic grounds alone, their real job is to work within the institutional structure to teach. And yet their continued employment usually depends upon their contributions to the field of art, by showing their work in prestigious galleries and publishing in national or juried periodicals. Their schedules may or may not be flexible, but the creative energy involved in teaching well is not unlike what is necessary to make art. Consequently, many artist-teachers make art only during school breaks. At other times, they must attend meetings, co-ordinate with their colleagues, design curriculum, oversee the workings of a communal studio with all the usual problems of managing people, inventory and budget, pedagogy, safety, and the restrictions of the decision-making process that is necessarily a collaborative process. The rewards are enormous and many express delight in the continuity of their relationships with students, seeing a spark catch and passing on their own excitement in learning. For them, there exists the possibility of having the rare and precious opportunity to contribute to a life.

RANDY SCHMIDT

I have already mentioned Randy Schmidt, a very important former teacher of Alan Bennett's. Randy Schmidt is a professor of art (ceramics) at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. His BA is in art from Hamline University, St. Paul, MN, and his M.A. in art, ceramics and sculpture, is from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. He has curated and juried many exhibitions, including "North" an international, invitational traveling exhibition and co-organized "The



Figure X: Randy Schmidt, *Terry's Chair*, 4' high x 24" wide

International Invitational Traveling Ashtray Exhibition." He has exhibited nationally and internationally throughout the USA, Canada, Russia and Japan. In 1991, Randy Schmidt was an invited guest of the "Soviet Artist's Union" in Jurmula, Latvia and attended a month long ceramic symposium, and in 1972 was invited to present an exhibition and workshop at the Universidad de Sonora, Hermasillo, Sonora, Mexico where he was also presented with an honorary diploma. His

work is in permanent collections in the Pushkin

Art Museum, Moscow; the Latvian Museum of Modern Art, Latvia; Arabia Studios, Helsinki, Finland; City Center Building, Edmonton, Alberta; the Red Deer College Permanent Collection, Red Deer, Alberta and in many collections in the USA. His publications include *Ceramics Monthly*, *Designer's West: Magazine for*

Professional Designers and Architects, Craft Horizons, Studio Potter, Arizona Ceramics and many others. His work has been reproduced in the *Complete Book of Ceramic Art* (1972) by Polly Rothenburg.

I met Randy Schmidt as a result of 'The International Traveling Ceramic Ashtray Show' which he organized with Tom Belden and Gary Greenburg, coinciding with the meeting of the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts, San Diego, CA, 1993. I spoke with him via telephone.

CA: July 9th, 2000 and I'm talking with Randy Schmidt of Phoenix, Arizona....

RS: I grew up in the Midwest. I was born in Iowa, but ...we moved to St. Paul, Minnesota when I was... in the 3rd grade... My first memories are... when I started school. I always had a hard time at school. I didn't like it 'cause ...I was always being criticized for not doing well, or as well as they thought I could do. I think fairly early on, I ...adopted the role of the class clown: ...since you were gonna get bawled out anyway, why not be cool about it?

What I remember most about grade school was writing lines. I wrote...thousands. The one I remember most was: *"Unnecessary dropping of my pencil was disturbing those who wished to study."* What that prepared me for in life, I still have not figured out.

But I know the hardest thing for me was math. To this day, I can't do the multiplication tables--I don't know what 5x7, 7x9, 4x8-- Those go

nowhere. I used to add, [imagining] a series of dominoes-- dots in front of my eyes.

CA: Could you explain that a little bit?

RA: I [could add by imagining a pattern of dots, like dominoes],
...whenever I had to add 4 and 5, I ...[would see the five dots and the four dots in the same pattern as you see in dominos, and I would just know] that it's 9. ...But I remember in 4th grade, ...the teacher would send me up to the board and the class would make fun of me 'cause I didn't know things.

CA: What kind of things didn't you know?

RS: The multiplication things-- I'd just... be so embarrassed. I could figure most things out. I remember as a little kid figuring things out, but it was always a different way than other people were doing it. I got through school. I know I got called in to the principal a couple of times; they'd be mad at me for not working up to my abilities. They said that I was smart enough, but they didn't-- and I didn't-- know what it was. I didn't understand what the problem was and when I first learned about dyslexia I thought: "*I have that, then!*" And that's what I had, but they just called you 'dummy' then.

CA: Do you remember any specific instances, any troubles other than math that you had?

RS: Well to this day, I can't spell very well, either. ...I'd never bring the [spelling] list home. I'd forget the list, but I could always remember what was on it. I always had a great memory and I could remember almost anything that wasn't really important. ...The school work was just tough. I wasn't a real interested reader at the time-- I'm a *ferocious* reader today. But I'm still more of a magazine and short story reader. I have a harder time with big long things. ...I'm left handed and that was dealt with in kind of a rude way at the time. They tried to change you and I remember getting slapped on the back of my hand and the teacher would say: "*We write with our right hand!*" And to this day, if asked to turn right, I turn left. 'Cause I write with that hand [and "*We write with our right hand.*"]. I knew there was something that wasn't just the same about me, and I'd have to figure things out in a different way.

CA: When was the first time you had that thought, that you were somehow different?

RS: Oh, I think it was in 3rd, 4th grade. Well, ... there were ...unpleasantries that you ... try to forget. A lot of them had to with math. There was just... a hole in my brain for math; it didn't work. ...Interestingly,

later when I had to take it in college, I could understand trigonometry and things like that, as long as it didn't have letters attached to it. If I could visualize a triangle or something like that, it made sense, but algebra, that was ridiculous.

CA: What about algebra was difficult for you?

RS: I couldn't do it, and they would always be so smug about it. "*What? You don't get this?*" ...The one I remember the most: a stream is going 3 miles an hour and there's a crosswind at 5. Which way is the crow flying if-- whatever those words. I could figure them out by making little scale models out of paper and sliding them in opposite directions..., then I could kind of get close to it. But it certainly wasn't the way you were supposed to solve the problem.

CA: What happened then, what happened after?

RS: ...My parents were both educated and I was supposed to go [to college] whether I wanted to or not. And I really didn't ever know anything other than that-- that I was going on to college and in high school you couldn't take Shop. You couldn't take Art because only dumb people did that and you were supposed to take these college preparatory classes.

...In my second year of college is when I found Art. I'd never had an art course before that. But having said that, as a little kid, my mother had me take swimming lessons in the morning and drawing in the afternoon at the YMCA. ...I'm not a good draftsman today, but I filled reams of paper. I discovered three-dimensional stuff... [was really fulfilling] 'cause I could see it.

CA: So what started to happen that made things improve for you?

RS: ...I don't come from one of those situations where the parents were unsupportive. ...Dad and Mom were both teachers and I always... wanted to do well.... They would help me. They got me tutors and I hated that 'cause... I knew it was a huge waste of money. No matter how good the tutor was nothing seemed to register with math.

But I loved to work; I built ...little wooden cars. ...We called them chugs and literally [they had] ...nail kegs for the body, curtain rods for axils, a plank and wheels that turn with ropes, and we'd put the steering wheel on it later. ...My dad was a wood shop teacher, so he let me have [access to] all of his tools at a very young age. I loved to tinker around and build things and that was ...my joy and that was something that I could do. I could figure things out... spatially. If I could see it, then I could do it.

There was one other... key thing that I think made me who I am.... I was probably ...in the 6th grade, maybe the 7th, even the 8th, I don't know,

and one of the neighbors asked me to babysit. This was kind of unusual because most mothers didn't work. In this family, the mother worked and she needed somebody to look after these two boys just in the afternoons for about an hour and a half. The kids just stayed in their rooms so they weren't any problem to look after. But in the basement, there was a whole wall full of *Popular Mechanics* magazines. And I loved them and I would go there and say: "*Kids, don't get in trouble.*" and I'd go down in the basement and read *Popular Mechanics* magazines. I loved the ones before the war that had... those Indian wood engravings. They would show exploded views of everything, like your refrigerator or how to make something for your car. Back then, there weren't that many products. Everything had gone in to the war, so it was a ...do-it-yourself thing. You made it; you didn't think of going out and buying it. You made it, but I loved that. I was big and they wanted Athletes, but I didn't really like that. I wasn't terribly coordinated So, I'd stay home. I did go out for some athletics, mostly for my dad. He was a real athlete.

CA: Do you have any siblings?

RS: I have a sister five years younger.

CA: And your parents were teachers, and was there anyone else in your family that you can recall who might have had difficulties similar to yours in school?

RS: ...I wasn't around a big extended family. They lived in Iowa. ...I have one cousin who might've been..., had kind of the same problem 'cause certain things were hard for him....

...I was pretty good at history and things like that 'cause that was kind of interesting.

CA: What was interesting about it?

RS: Well, ... those people did ...exciting things and I love the idea of adventure-- stories, at the time it was like cowboys and Indians. I wanted to go out West and... be part of that.

My dad always would take me pheasant hunting. That was a thing we always did together and I loved that. Part of it was just the responsibility of having a gun, something that was... powerful and destructive-- to ...keep that under control, so you didn't hurt somebody else. I've always loved birds, but I never had any trouble shooting them. That's kind of weird. I'd have bird feeders and then go out and... hunt them. But we'd always eat them too, so I guess that was the justification. I love those personal sports.

CA: Do you recall any situations with your peers that might have been related to your difficulties in school?

RS: There was another kid, Dick ..., ...but he was very talented. I don't think his parents ever treated him, his mother did, his dad didn't treat him very well. He was kinda ...brushed off, like I was in school.

They couldn't brush me off completely because my dad would show up in school and raise holy hell if they did anything too bad to me. I remember one time getting kept after school. It was in Minnesota, so it was cold in the winter. And on the way home, we fell through the ice in the pond. Everybody was freaked out; we were really late.... But I remember the next day, the teacher and the principal and my dad in the office.... I remember my dad saying: "*I don't care what he does, he gets on that school bus every night and he gets home!*" So I had support and I appreciated that.

But my friend Dick-- I thought he was really, really bright... [original and inventive], but... we had trouble with the same things. So there was kind of a bond there. But he didn't go to college, things just kinda fell apart. ...I always wondered what happened to him; how did he drop through the cracks? Partly it was he just didn't have support.

CA: And your support was your parents?

RS: ...I mean ...somebody helping you to just go on. ...I was also always told that I had a high I.Q. ...I knew that I wasn't dumb, but you were treated like you were dumb if you couldn't do some of the things.

CA: Well it's nice that they told you that you had a high I.Q.

RS: And then I kinda pretty much forgot about that. ...I'm probably just about average..... I could figure things out by my wits.... As you know, I went to Russia in 1991 when the Soviet Union was falling apart and there were a number of artists over there. It was really interesting. Some of us just loved to deal with, everything--the language, the organization--because it was so sublimely screwed up that it made total sense to me.... A lot of people had a real hard time with it... People would say: "*What do we do now?*" But really, it was: "*Do what you're gonna do! And figure it out later.*"

CA: So it wasn't as uncomfortable a situation for you as it was for others?

RS: No, no, it was wonderfully weird!

CA: Well you already had had experiences where things didn't make sense and you had to go on anyway.

RS: That was it, and I thought of that a lot. This place doesn't make any sense, so I know how to deal with it. That is true, I thought about that a lot lying in bed at night.

CA: So, any things that are currently still difficult for you that you attribute to learning disabilities?

RS: At the time, they said I was a dummy. [But now] I think a lot of it has been turned into an asset. I know that who I am was firmly shaped by that.... [Back then you weren't tested, they didn't know about dyslexia, but I think that's what it was.] I know one thing that I've always been for the underdog. As a teacher, I always championed the person who had a hard time of it. And I suppose I always gave a little bit of extra help to them. I always tried to make sure that they found something that they could deal with, and work with. I'vebeen a mentor to a lot of people that were the underdogs, and so I think that's probably made me a pretty decent teacher, at least for them.

CA: You did say that you still have difficulties with spelling and are impatient with long documents?

RS: Oh God! Yeah, ...I'm a cripple with those things, but then when I finally have to sit down and do it, I can do all right. It's just so painful-- ...I'm not good at computers but before we had the word processing thing, to put ...a résumé together [was awful!]..... You screw up and you had to re-type the whole thing...!

CA: How's your sense of direction?

RS: Precise,... always has been. ...I'm rarely lost. As you know, I do a bit ...of exploring in the desert, also hunting and stuff like that and I've been in some situations where my life depended on that sense of direction. I'm ...good at [finding my way back] out.

Math is still an issue. I avoid it. When I was in college, I spent \$108.00 on one of the first ...little electronic calculators. That was a lot of money at the time, still is. But then, it was more like about \$500.00, right? ... I thought it was just so marvelous that you can just press buttons and do away with all that stuff. ... I'm still mathematically impaired and I've been certified. When I took the graduate ... exam or whatever, I scored in the 98th percentile. That meant that 98% of human beings did better at it than I did. I guess I was in the 2%.... It's just awful!

CA: Do you mess with the glaze calculation?

RS: Oh, I hate it! I'll work my way around that any day-- if I could. But if I had ...a gun to my head, I could do it.... [But I wouldn't like it.] ... I do it like you cook. I know what the different ingredients do. I know that if you put too much salt in, it doesn't taste good. ... I know what things make the glazes melt and I certainly know what makes the colors. I know how to make a glaze stiffen up [not run]. Some people love that stuff, love the

chemistry of it. Mine is more of an approximation; it's kinda like how to get the job done. I could not care less about making those numbers line up.

CA: Do you build kilns?

RS: Oh, yeah, see that's a working problem. You build something, [if] it doesn't work and then you figure out what did not work and make it work. And I listen: ...If somebody had a theory on something, I would listen to it and not be quick to tell them, "No, this is the way it is." ...I thought of that when you mentioned kilns because one of my first grad students... taught me really how to fire a kiln. Now, I'd been the kiln fire god in college and grad school, but I never understood what ...made it work. It was all kind of paint-by-numbers: do this and then this. But he taught me how to read the flames, you know, again kinda seat-of-your-pants stuff.

CA: Seat of your pants...

RS: You did it by-- you just had to-- you had to find a way of understanding and it wasn't always the way other people understood it.

CA: Can you think of any other example of how you understand things differently than other people?

RS: Well, I've always thought that I'm my best teacher. ... If I visually experience something first hand, then I really know it. Even though I like to read today, it's just so many words. But if you read enough, you pick up a little here and a little there. ...I use that a lot 'cause I read all kinds of things. I love trivia; I love mechanical things. I like knowing about things.

CA: You have a broad knowledge base.

RS: ...I always thought it was kind of a detriment in some ways 'cause I knew a little about a lot of things. I've always admired people who just throw themselves completely into something. They just know everything about that one thing and I've never been able to do that....

CA: ...What was your first recollection of doing art activities?

RS: Well, drawing as a kid as I mentioned. I used to just love to do that and my parents encouraged me. They ...made sure that I had drawing tablets and [lots of art supplies].... I'd just draw and draw and draw. ... I loved to draw, but I probably loved it less when I got in school and was told it wasn't the way it was supposed to be. ... It's supposed to look like this... That ...took some things out of it for me. But then when I got into 3-dimensional art.... I'd always done 3-dimensional things in my shop as a kid... In fact, I got into art when I was a Business major....

CA: How did you wind up as a Business major?

RS: ...First I was in Political Science and then it was Business. ...You were supposed to make money. Do something in college and learn how to make money. ...I remember walking by the Art Department and seeing guys and gals welding and they were having fun and I thought: "*God, they're enjoying this and I'm not!*" So I wanted to take a welding class. Well, you gotta take these other things [first]. So I did, kinda begrudgingly.

I remember one day going home and telling my folks that I was gonna be an art major. I thought they were gonna have a horrible time with that, but they thought that if that's what I wanted, fine. Once I found that out, I felt pretty comfortable. [There was a teacher] I like to give credit to because he ...encouraged me and helped me along. Later on in grad school, there was a man named Ron Grove and those two people were the people who made it all happen for me.

CA: What did they do that was so exciting?

RS: Through them I realized that I could do it. ... I guess they allowed me to be me, they allowed me to see that I was all right, even though I ...doing things differently. I never forgot that. That's why I became a teacher. I wanted to pay them back and I really couldn't. They both told me to just pass on the information. Pass on the... energy and I guess I've been doing it for 32 years.

CA: How do you feel when you work?

RS: ...I guess I've always like not knowing. ...You work real hard to master something, then sometimes when you know it, you're like: "*Ooh, is that all there is?*" I've got a [bad] record of doing that over the years. I think about that a lot. Once you understand something, it's not nearly as interesting to me as that kind of wonderful bewilderment stage. I like that part when...we start making our own problems. [It is more interesting] trying to work our way out of a problem that we've set up ourselves....

CA: Problem-finding, then solving?

RS: Yeah, ...I like the edginess of it. ... I'm not really interested in doing it again. I would've been much more successful, career wise, if I could've kept doing the same things, again and again and again. ... I just wasn't interested.

CA: So you like doing one-of-a-kind things?

RS: One-of-a-kind, or enough of them [so you] ...get a feel for it. And then a leaf will blow across the yard, and I'm off on something else. Not a great way to build a career, but I just decided early on that my teaching, being a professor, college teacher was my living, and my [art] work was for me.

CA: So what does it do for you?

RS: Well, ...I used to call it scratching the earth. It was my way of making a little something that would work towards the betterment of mankind. ...I'm a little older now and I'm not quite convinced that ... I am that important.... But I think we have to pursue something and I'm glad that what I do is not a negative thing. It's not building bombs or tearing people apart. It's hopefully for the betterment of people, in a real small way....

CA: What is your art about?

RS: Usually about experiences in my life, the way I view the world, making my own personal little comments about the human condition, what's going on. Not like a soapbox, but it's kinda my way of dealing with those things.



Figure XI: Randy Schmidt, *Classical Example of What Not to Do in the Desert*. 20"x13"

CA: Figuring out what the experiences mean?

RS: ... It means making little statements. At different times, it's been very sarcastic, sometimes whimsical.... But today, it's... [examining an

experience, idea, etc] in the studio, that I would like to... [ponder]. I bring back thoughts and ideas that revolve around whatever interests me. Thing is, it never ends up being... [what it started out as], but it is just a starting point. Like I often start out by thinking about the flight of birds.

... I've always been fascinated by birds. This is too weird-- and the fact that I also hunt. I can't say I like the fact that I'm killing the thing, but again you justify things. I hunt doves and there are millions of doves. But there's that strange instant transformation of something, flying gracefully, and then suddenly it's not. It folds and it's like, I shouldn't even be talking about this 'cause it's not about the thrill of killing. ... Like a dead bird in the road: It's something that was once this incredible free, mobile, fantastic thing in nature, and there it is all run over with a tire mark across it. It's like, woah! I guess it's life and death all rolled into one.

CA: I know you've done many artist's statements and probably some teaching philosophy statements. What would you say about what your intention is as a teacher and as an artist?

RS: As a teacher, I think that [you shouldn't ever] let anybody ever tell you what you can't do. Don't ask too many questions, [don't ask permission], just do it. I think that bleeds into art too. With students, it's always: *"Don't tell me what you're gonna do, just do it! Let me see what you've done."* So I... believe in just jumping in and trying it. I've not been quite as aggressive at it as I'd like to be. In too many cases, I've worried

about what other people would think, when I was younger at least. Like: "Is this any good? [Do you approve?]" ... I've noticed that people who want to do something, if they want to do it badly enough, they usually can do it. I think it's that desire, wanting to make something happen. ... [It's] not always the brightest, the people that we think are going to set the world on fire, but the ones who just keep plugging along....

As an artist, I think the last statement I wrote probably had to do with that thing about ...experiences in my life, ... trying to understand these things, liking juxtapositions, liking the unknown. Lately..., I consider myself a ceramic sculptor more than anything, but lately I've doing some pottery and it's much quieter, ...a different way of seeing, big platters..., square platters, 2-feet by 2-feet. Lately I've been trying to handle these fairly large objects, but there's problems of firing, there's problems of cracking, there's-- but trying to do them with a free and easy glaze application. It's something that I'm playing with right now.

CA: Drawing with a really fluid glaze application.

RS: Yeah.

CA: Does art have any particular meaning for you besides being your livelihood?

RS: ... I thought art was or should be... a thing you should just dream with, you know, strange and wonderful places. ... Art to me was kind of like my own private world. I became less private as I started teaching, but it

was a place that I could exist and not have a lot of people telling me what to do.

CA: So it was a place where you could be yourself and make the rules....

RS: Yeah, I could invent my own rules. ...It's just my world. ...I like storytelling, I like storytelling in my work, not a complete story but just a little bit. ... Just a little section. I had an experience a couple of years ago where I had met some writers up in Canada: poets and different types of writers. Their way of working ... was very similar to working in art. Then I did some writing in 1994, I think, and I loved it and I hope to be able to do it again. It's just a matter of getting an uninterrupted few hours to sit down and write. I really felt that I had found kind of a vehicle that was as much fun as art. I hadn't done it, forever, because I was a poor speller. I was told, "*You're no good at this...*", but you can get a machine or somebody else to clean up the spelling. When I found out that it doesn't matter, it can just be your words, I loved that whole process of writing things down.

CA: How is the process similar to art-making?

RS: Well, I think you just start out with something; you dive into it. You don't really know where it's going to take you. Maybe you have an idea, but you're just not sure how it's gonna work out. I love those decisions as you go, ...feeling your way along and getting stumped and working your way out of that....

CA: So, the \$64,000 question: In what ways do you think your experiences with learning disabilities or dyslexia might be connected with your experiences in art making?

RS: Well, ... when I finally got into art, I couldn't believe that I found something that I liked doing, that I could do. I worked on cars, not the mechanics but re-building custom cars. I always liked that kind of re-making something, changing it in my own way and art was the same thing.

CA: It occurred to me several times you describe it as being a relief. Can you explain?

RS: It was a relief to find something that I was good at, that I understood. Then it was okay to be me. All that time of wondering, ...wondering if I ever would find something that I really liked to do. That doesn't mean it was easy, 'cause I think that sometimes that we talk too much about 'playing'-- it's not always fun and games. It's a lot of work and a lot nagging headaches and things going wrong all the time. But it was something that I had a feel for.... I think with some kind of a learning disability, if I needed something, I could figure out a way. With glazing as long as everything's in percentages, I understand that. I understand those relationships, but to figure out empirical formulas, well give me a break! Let a chemist do that.

I think the relationship, and I've talked some with Don Reitz, Alan Bennett⁵⁹, my friend and former student, and several others. In some respect, I think it's a gift. It's kind of like when something's taken away, something else is given. Or maybe you sharpen other pencils, have other bows in your quiver. If you don't have the math arrow, you use something else, find your way around it. I think it made me... figure things out in a different way. It makes you unique. I must go back and say that I liked being in art, I liked the fact that I could use my own way of doing things, my own brain, the one that I was supposed to have.

... All the way through school, you were supposed to do this, do that and ... maybe I just never liked being told what to do....

CA: So it works out better if you can be the rule maker.

RS: You bet! But I didn't like telling other people what to do either, I just really didn't like being told what to do. In art, you know, when you're making your work, nobody tells you what to do, except yourself. You try to be honest with yourself and that's not easy always....

CA: When you spoke a few minutes ago about your teaching, you had some words of advice to learners that sounded very much like things you had to learn in order to compensate.

⁵⁹Alan Bennett's interview proceeds Randy Schmidt's and Don Reitz's interview concludes the interviews.

RS: ... I've seen people being told that they can't do something, and therefore they can't. I think that's a real tragedy. ... I would just try to encourage people to go after whatever their dream is even if it sounds totally bizarre or impossible. Just because I can't do it doesn't mean they can't. I always like when people are doing what I call left-handed thinking, or just coming from a different place 'cause I think that opens up some space....

... I suppose going back to those times in grade school when I felt that I was being put down for not being able to do things, you know, like math things and then to be able to help somebody move-- I just like moving ahead.

CA: Did you have any particularly helpful teachers who did anything that stands out in your mind?

RS: Yeah, I had people believe in me. A lady, I don't know whether, it was Mrs. Brant, I think that was her name, about the 7th grade. When I was disrupting the class, she was a new teacher and I remember standing up and walking over and picking up some flower pots in the window, and she said: "*Randall what are you doing?*" It was right when she was talking, and I was doing it just to be a bug and I said: "*Your flowers are wilted, I was going to give them some water.*" Of course, I was just creating a disturbance, but she said: "*Randall, thank you. That's very*

thoughtful, I really appreciate it."

I went in the hall and cried, I felt so bad. ... She believed me and I thought okay, I'll play ball. I remember like it happened yesterday. I can see the people who were giggling in the back where I sat and I came back in the room.... I guess believing in somebody is just kind of like allowing people to find their own way, not the way that I think it should be done, but to help them find their own tracks.

CA: Do you have anything to add that you think should be known?

RS: Well, if dyslexia or some learning disability is a hindrance-- God it is, I've been able to overcome some..., find something else that excites you, use your uniqueness. Today, I'm just grateful that I've been able to make use of it. I think maybe that's a good thing to live by your wits. I don't know any other way.

Summary:

Randy Schmidt was born in 1943; one of two children, he grew up in urban St. Paul, Minnesota where he loved to hunt with his father, build wooden cars and spend large amounts of time watching exotic animals at a large local zoo. He also played sports, largely to please his father, but did not think he was very coordinated. From an early age, his parents also sent him to art classes at the local YMCA. Throughout his childhood, they encouraged him to draw, providing him with ample art supplies. He drew and painted and played with the wooden cars he had made.

His father taught high school woodshop classes and both parents were very active in his education, particularly as advocates in school. Both parents were teachers and education was considered important; it was expected that he would eventually attend university. Although he said that he was thought a “dummy,” he was scolded for not working up to his potential and eventually tested. He was told at some point that he had a high I.Q. Therefore it is doubtful that the school authorities actually thought him stupid. The testing suggests that attempts were made to understand his poor school performance, even if no satisfactory answer was found. He did have math tutors, but felt that this was a waste of money because he “had a hole in his brain for math.”

His first memories concerned school, which was difficult and embarrassing. The other children laughed and teased him when he was called to the chalkboard and teachers did not protect him in any way from this humiliation. The multiplication tables were the worst problem, but his spelling was also a concern. He often lost worksheets and spelling lists, but could usually remember what most of the words were on the sheet. He claims a great memory for anything unimportant, but it seems that by unimportant he means that he was interested in things not considered important in school. He remembered material that he understood, that interested him and which formed a lasting image in his mind. He talked about liking history, for example, because it was just like an action adventure story. Storytelling played a large part in his school interests, as it currently does in his artwork, and seems directly related to conveying visual images.

Randy discovered that, even in math, he could be successful if he could represent the problem using “little scale models out of paper.” Visual representations were very important and he described adding or subtracting by imagining the patterns of dots on dominos, but throughout the interview repeated the phrase, “but that’s not the way you’re *supposed* to solve that problem.” Later in his education, he found that he could do geometry, but not algebra. This suggested that if a number could be referred to a visual image, he was fine. However if another step were added and a letter (a symbol) represented a number (another symbol), he was lost. Although these symbols in fact represent something he could have pictured, this step was not made explicit. I suspect that if he had been encouraged to draw a picture or tell a story about his algebra problems, he could have worked through the difficulties even in algebra.

To avoid embarrassment in school, he became a class clown and was often disruptive in class. As class clown, he was often punished, but other children thought he was cool. This changed abruptly one day when Randy was being disruptive in class and a substitute teacher asked him what he was doing. He told her that he was watering the plants, and perhaps believing him, the teacher thanked him. This act of belief moved him deeply.

In fact, throughout the interview, the concept of belief repeated itself. His talented friend, Dick, fell between the cracks because no one supported and believed in him, unlike Randy’s parents or his first ceramics teachers who believed he was capable. Later in the interview, he defined belief as, “... allowing people to find their own way.” I think that belief and dignity are strongly linked

together for Randy Schmidt. This was echoed in several ways. Art-making was a relief because "... it was okay to be me." That is, others trusted that he could figure things out in his own way, given the opportunity. "I liked being in art, I liked the fact that I could use my own way of doing things, my own brain, the one that I was meant to have." He did not have to try to be like someone who is good at algebra to be a capable and dignified human being.

Randy Schmidt's artwork is a commentary on his experiences. "I thought art was, or should be... a thing you dream with.... Art was my own private world... It was a place I could exist and not have a lot of people telling me what to do." When making art, he could make up the rules and define his own problems. Randy Schmidt also makes an interesting comparison between writing and working in clay. In writing, it is possible to "...just dive into it. You don't know where it's going to take you.... I love those decisions as you go, ... feeling your way along...."

Randy Schmidt describes his love of working in clay in exactly the same way, making decisions in response to the particular situation, telling a story that renders experience comprehensible, making objects that create a world which rotates according to an internal logic of the maker's invention.

JOHN GILL

John Gill is a professor of ceramics at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, one of the foremost graduate ceramics departments in North America. John Gill enjoys an international reputation for his ceramic vessels and sculpture, and is a two-time recipient of the prestigious



Figure XII: John Gill

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships. His work is in the collections of, among others, The Archie Bray Foundation, MT; Kansas City Art Institute, MO; Kent State University, OH; The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England and The Rhode Island

School of Design Museum, RI. I spoke with John Gill at his home in Alfred Station, NY.

JG: I was born in Seattle, WA., ... the third of eight kids. My big sister probably has the same reading problem that I have [and maybe]... one of my younger brothers as well. ...Out of eight, there's probably four in the family who have some sort of learning problem. ...We lived out in the country, so we were always building things. Building things was ... [really] important-- figure out how to make something the simplest way possible, figure out what sort of system could solve that problem. I didn't need a

manual to figure it out; I would just figure out how things went together visually. ... [With experience], you build up some sort of structural intuition.

CA: What did you like to build?

JG: We would dig; we would build tree houses. We had a jigsaw in the basement: we'd cut wood, ... hammer things together. We'd always be building things. [With]... 5 brothers and 2 sisters, you have an army of people to make whatever you want.

CA: What kind of games did you play?

JG: There were three other large families in the neighborhood. We'd ... play baseball, lots of baseball, soccer, Red Rover. You didn't have all the Nintendo stuff.... So three families with eight kids each to dig a tunnel that would be phenomenal. ...We'd just put wood over the top of it. It was all dirt. We'd just be filthy; it was great!

CA: How old were you when you first became aware of learning problems?

JG: I would say probably third grade. Third grade was probably the hardest. ... I was born in '49. My third grade class might have had 48 kids in it. It was... A BIG class, and so ...if somebody was having problems, they were just pushed to the next level. I had no trouble with drawing or

anything like that. Most of my problems were with reading or writing.

Writing was really a problem.

CA: Do you remember any specific instances that would illustrate for me what kinds of experiences you had?

JG: ... In sixth grade, I had to turn in a twenty-four page report on something, and the nun who was the teacher was really into penmanship. ... I turned in a twenty page report that looked like Jackson Pollock had just taken it off the floor. ... She asked me..., "*Could you read this to me?*" ... I didn't remember what I had written. ...Go back and decipher a piece of writing? That's the hardest thing in the world to me. In seventh grade, I went to a private school for boys that was a cross between an orphanage and a school for troubled boys because of an incorrigible stunt I ...played on the ... principal of the school. So I went to a boarding school and if you couldn't spell, you got whipped....⁶⁰

CA: How long did you stay there?

⁶⁰Edwards, 1994, reported an alarming number of male dyslexics had been hit, beaten or whipped during their early and middle and high school years, usually by male teachers. She speculated that male students' frustration in school quite often presents itself as challenges to the teacher's authority, and that male teachers were more likely to respond violently to the perceived attack.

JG: I was there for two years.... Boarding school gave me a chance to meet people from different economic backgrounds, mostly poor. This was a school that was set aside for boys that had disciplinary problems. If your parents were alcoholics, you were in trouble..., or a ward of the court..., you'd go there. [In 1963] if you were an orphan, you would be there. I went to two places that were like that. [But in some ways, it wasn't so bad.] We had ten acres where we'd go out and build....

... I can remember all the classes. ...We had this one guy, an ex-Marine, a Christian Brother, who [taught American history]. He would talk about Johnny Bull coming over from England to fight in the American Revolution. [He described everything in a way that made it very exciting].... It was very visual....

The best people were the people who taught me how to garden, or taught me how to sing, or taught me how to do a job.... I was a great pruner by the seventh grade. I figured out how to make the strawberries go back into the line. I had ducks... It was ...a great place to go. The only problem is there was a little bit-- I had calcium deposits on the backs on my fingers from being hit because I couldn't spell.

... I love gardening! My grandmother was a great gardener and she knew what sort of potential I had. She told my mom: *"You know, this guy is not like any of your other kids."*

CA: Did she explain why she thought that?

JG: Oh, Grandma was ...a sixth grade teacher. She said: "*He's going about things in a different way.*" At the age of 6, I could ...sit down with a piece of paper and water colors and do a still life of all the stuff that was on the table at Grandma's house. ... She was able to figure out ways that she could support the creative side. Mom and Dad didn't understand....
[And there were, after all, eight kids who each needed attention.]

CA: How did your family feel about your going to this reform school?

JG: Mom dropped me off; she was in tears. They weren't allowed to see me for a month, but I had to write once a week. ...I printed.

CA: What were your favorite classes?

JG: Favorite classes: ...Art, singing, drama.

CA: What are your first memories of these classes?

JG: Well, in boarding school, there was no art. So I'd ...figure out a way to make things. I really missed ...making things. At home I could make whatever I wanted.... By the time I got out of boarding school, I was really,

really, starved for the chance to make an object, trying to understand what something was.

CA: Did you have any art before you were sent away to school?

JG: Just kindergarten. I was two years in kindergarten. I should've been two years in first grade, too. But I was two years in kindergarten, so I know how to cut paper, how to fold paper... I can ...do origami, figure out how to fold something, make a pattern. I can make almost anything. ... I think that kids should be in kindergarten until the 12th grade. Then we would really make some really great thinkers and visualizers. Forget all this history stuff, what a male chauvinist idea that is! But I liked history.

CA: Why?

JG: I liked seeing how people think and what sort of strategy they utilized. I think I would really love a military strategy class and that would be probably the best class I could ever take. But I would take it the way I told a student to take geology: *"Don't marry it, just date it."* ... You're not making a heavy commitment to it. I don't think I'd want to ...be out there on the battlefield trying to catch bullets....

CA: You like drama. What did you like about drama?

JG: Well, I just love being able to sing and go up on stage,... take on a part that somebody else wrote, ...trying to convey the feeling-- you get the

same thing with singing. By the time I graduated high school, I was going to go into art, cooking or ... to the Met. By that time, I already had five years of voice lessons -- I wanted to go to the Met. ...The boarding school's where they taught me how to sing. There was an Irish folk dancing troupe and ... I'd sing Irish songs....

CA: How do you think you learned best?

JG: Everything I learned was by showing me how to do it. My big sister showed me how to cook. My mom taught me how to sew....

CA: How did you learn in school?

JG: I went to school every day. I sat there. Doodling. Drawing. I was trying to take notes. Did the notes make sense? No! There wasn't enough of a picture in my mind.... THEN things changed in college. In college, things really changed, but -- we'll get to that.

CA: You told me on the phone about this wonderful teacher in 12th grade. Can you tell me a little bit about this person?

JG: I had awful English teachers for-- I had just gotten out of boarding school, 9th grade. I was in boarding school 7th, 8th and 9th grade. The last

boarding school I went to, they had no art whatsoever.... I took all my classes [except math]-- [When]... I took...[a] math class my junior year and I did really, really well. [So I thought]...I should take algebra ... senior year.

...But this algebra teacher [was a bad teacher]. ...[During class], I was ...drawing [something]... I wanted to make at home, a piece of sculpture. It was a drawing of a nude female. I had this wonderful piece of paper and this ...beautiful nude that was almost like Degas, reaching for the foot.... [The teacher] was walking down the aisle... and grabs this piece of paper from me and says: "*What are you doing?*" So I take the piece of paper back from him: "*You can't have that yet, I haven't signed it.*" So I sign it and I give it back to him. Well, I was out of that class [pretty fast]....

In 10th grade I went right into an *a capella* choir. I was in it for four years; it was the best choir in the school. And ...I did all the musicals that I could do.... It was a nice high school ...[in a] good neighborhood. I took every art class I could take. I graduated at the end of my senior year with-- I did [not do well enough on my] ...SAT's... to get into the Kansas City Art Institute....

But before that happened [while I was still in high school], I had this teacher, Don Bunger and he lives in Seattle now.⁶¹ He's probably the most amazing person in the world that I have ever come across.

⁶¹Don Bunger's telephone interview is included in the appendices.

In the late 60's, John Gill went to a very big high school with a large graduating class. Most of the English classes were team-taught with huge class sizes. However because John Gill worked in the school library and took art courses, he had an odd schedule and was put into an English class with others who also had awkward schedules: year book or school newspaper editors, kids who worked in the library, and art students. It was a fairly small class, by the standards of that school, with a particularly interesting mix of students. The class discussions about the literature assignments were extremely exciting to John.

JG: ...Every day, I'd try to read [the assigned text but had terrible trouble], and so every day, after school I'd go to the... [English teacher] who would read to me from the assignment. He'd read me other stuff too. ... Northrup Fry, which ...was heavy! Bertram Russell, all these philosophers, ...totally wiggy guys. It was wonderful!

CA: Why did he agree to read to you?

JG: ...[I was] just trying to learn a bit more about what the class is about. So he'd read to me.... He was a young teacher. ... In senior year, he told me about putting a concept into a sentence and taking a concept out of a sentence. That's something that you should tell a ...first grader. That's what reading's about, but he ...[presented it] to me just like you'd

explain making [and appreciating] a piece of art. He'd read me something; I'd go home and make a piece of sculpture. He'd read me another thing ...[and so on].

This is the same time as the guy I'd autographed the drawing for. [I love geometry and should have done well in that class.] The English teacher would read me these things and I'd go make art. He still has some of the art I did in high school. He really made a big impression on me.

CA: What were differences between the teachers who did a good job with you and those who didn't?

JG: Well, [sometimes] ...you're doing something and... [suddenly understand the system, the patterns and relationships]. I think ...sometimes students have to go through that themselves. ...I had already done it in music, ...gardening, [and] ...cooking....

CA: So you're saying it was you learning, not teachers teaching?

JG: ...I think drama probably was the only English class I had that made sense.... You'd have to ...get in there and knock out the lines to figure out what they mean. You'd have to go over them, more than once, just to ...understand them. Math never went well because I didn't have the time

or the endurance to go through one whole page of math.

CA: So were there any differences in the way material was presented that helped you to come to understandings like that?

JG: At that point, I was on my way out of high school. I could do art. I ...was teaching every kid in the class how to do sculpture and I was taking night school at a junior college.... I was taking private lessons from a sculptor. At that point everything else had clicked, I knew what I wanted to do.

CA: So you think being successful in your art helped you to be successful in this other [English] class?

JG: Yes. I think that if you're able to do something right and you have that positive reinforcement, ...[it comes together]!

But can I go on more about this guy? I graduated and I got pretty good grades in his class. I got probably a "B-", which would have been a very, very good grade for me. Then I went to art school and the next year I went full time to a non-academic art school. They don't have those anymore. It was five days a week, eight hours a day of art. Life drawing, I had probably about twelve hours a week in front of a model. I had to take two Art History classes my freshman year, survey classes. At the end of

my first year, I had a 4.0 average. It was all "A"s. This stuff just clicked; it was all about art. Some of the stuff was hard. I mean I still remember difficult assignments... I liked that they weren't all easy. I still think about them....

CA: So you liked the challenge.

JG: Well I still like to think about how I would solve them.... I wasn't a painter; I was totally lopsided. I wasn't able to do drawing.... I was able to do sculpture. I was able to do the 3-dimensional things because of the building background I had. But after I graduated from college, ...I'd [go] meet my [old high school] English teacher and he would still read me stories. *"This is what I'm reading now!"*. So he would paraphrase the book. ...I started thinking about ...what [the book was] about, ... trying to figure how to do printmaking and cross the universe at the same time. All this really great stuff [I was doing] ...in art school and this guy back in high school, he'd be like: *"That relates to this!"* He would share with me what he was reading and we'd discuss it; it was GREAT!
(machine stopped for a minute)

CA: You were telling me about your English teacher / mentor?

JG: My mentor! Well, he was really great! I went to Cornish [art school] for two and a half years and all that time I could still go back and see my English teacher. I went to Kansas City Art Institute, got married, and still came back to see him. ...About 10 years back, my little sister went into his class and he said: *"You're nothing like your big brother."* She could read, she was able to do all that stuff. She had some reading problems when she was young, but ...they got to her soon enough.

Anyhow, he totally changed his curriculum from ...classics ...to science fiction. So ...a senior class...[would] read science fiction, but he had them read it as if it was real. [They]... had to figure out how the things worked, talk about it, be able to build the [science fiction machines]. [When I was his student], he'd read me a story and I'd make something. He'd go home, he'd read the directions on how to put something together, but [then] he couldn't build what the directions described. As an English teacher that totally frustrated him. The [directions]... were so badly written that you couldn't put them together.... [The writing didn't give him enough of a mental picture to be able to construct the object using the directions]....

That picture in your mind really is the magic of dyslexia. That's where the whole thing is absolutely magic. ...My dad was an engineer. ...Engineers, I think, ...[can] take that information... [and formulate an image].... They might have to have a mathematical equation-- that might be one of the ways that they think.

So, anyway, this English teacher taught science fiction as if it was reality. ...He had all the students making models. We went back 10 years later... and there were models hanging off the ceiling of his classroom. There were paintings on the wall. He says: *"How can you write in a sterile environment? You can write if you can see what you're writing about, but how can you write in a sterile environment?"* So he totally changed the way [he taught]. He... [told his students]: *"Go down there. Work with your art teacher. Bring back this information. This is all good stuff."* ...I know this guy, the guy read to me, he was my friend. ...*"This is the way to learn,"* he said....

CA: Tell me more about working with clay.

JG: I didn't even want to work with clay.... I wanted to be a bronze sculptor. Bronze was where... [it was at]. At the end of my first year, I had a complete scholarship to go for my second year, but I had to take a ceramics class. ...[I had a ceramics teacher who] was probably one of the best teachers I ever had. He really had a wonderful kind of...[precise method]. ...He taught us how to roll out a perfect coil and make a slab that would never break. From that I basically just relaxed and had a good time, but he was only my teacher for a semester....

...Then I went to Kansas City Art Institute. ...There's something about being dyslexic-- you don't think you need any help, and then ...you

hit rock bottom. It's not in your studio....

I've worked in two libraries in my life; I've memorized three of them. I could be a great librarian. I know where everything is in the library and this is one of the things that's really great about other people I know who are dyslexic. ...They're basically like a cancer: they start with one section and they just devour things, visual things. This is how I got along. I have a library over there that's full of books; any subject in there, I could find. [If my wife is looking for some painting, I know exactly where to find it. I can even find the page.] ...But I don't know what the text is about....

[At Kansas City], ...I just had to memorize the library. [It was]... a whole different type of library. ...There was a great museum there, but there were also some really great libraries. People would take me over to the library and show me books and then would share with me what they knew about them. Probably one of the best people to go to the library with was Kurt Weiser. ...The other person who was really good at giving me an oral history was Ken Ferguson. Ken Ferguson had this wonderful way of just telling me something [that would be like the missing piece of a puzzle], you'd put that piece of history in there and it was ...great.

Victor Babu would do something that was completely different. Victor Babu would tell me about something that he saw in a museum somewhere else and he would explain it. He would describe it in this unbelievably flamboyant way. I would look, and I would look, and I would look for these pots that are so magical. But I think they only exist in the

treasure troves of Aladdin's Lamp. They're not out there, but [thinking they might be] makes you think in a different way. You can imagine what something can be So I'd tell him that I'd seen it, and then he would elaborate about what he wants the thing to be and then you have to go and make it.

...So, Kansas City, I get there; I take Art History. By the end of my first year at Kansas City I had failed in my academics.

SIDE 2:

When I came back to school, I took some more academics and that year I remember doing a little bit better. What I did is, I took Western Civilization and the guy would read the book out loud. So, I would just reiterate what he told me. ...But I didn't do very well and I got probably "C-"s, but enough to pass, and I kept on taking the same classes with that guy. Then my junior year, I take a class and my friend [who was a teacher of mine] at Cornish, came as a visiting artist to Kansas City. By that time I was ...making some nice work....

I remember going into the cafeteria and there was this person who taught History sitting with my friend. I walked up to the table; I wanted to say, "Hi," to my friend, who was one of my mentors. ...[But this history teacher] had just read one of my papers and said out loud in front of my friend and maybe four or five other students: "*You must be illiterate.*" He could have said: "Let me talk with you privately about your paper." It was a public statement.

Now, one of the students who heard this was someone I had been really helping a lot with a handbuilding project. She...[told the senior faculty members in the department]. [One of them] ...confronted this history teacher and he says: *"If you want me to take care of this, I'll take care of this. I think it's your department, but if you want me to take care of it, I'll really take care of it!"* ...So [from then on] every one of my tests, I took home and ...had about two weeks to return it. I'd have it back in a week. Then, I took all my classes with another student who was in ceramics but she would not go to class. I would go to class for the both of us and then I would tell her everything that was discussed. I would tell her what the teacher thought was important, but I didn't do really well on the tests. The girl... got "B+"s; she could ...read, and she wrote well. She'd read ...the index of a book and tell you exactly what the book was about... So I'd go to the classes and she'd write her take-home paper and I'd write my take-home paper, and I'd get probably a "C+" and she get a "B+". She would help me re-write all my stuff and that was all the way through my junior year. My senior year, I had a roommate who helped me....

There was another time in...Ceramic Science for the Potter. I had never had chemistry; basic math was the highest math I had. And I also had a writing problem so I got a "C+" in that and you're not supposed to get a "C+" in graduate school. I was kicked out of graduate school and then re-admitted because, again, they didn't want to kick me out. So finally I did graduate.

CA: Tell me about glaze calculation.

JG: Glaze Calculation? Now I teach it. ...I was given the job of teaching Glaze Calculation after Val Cushing taught it. Val is great. He was a wonderful teacher and he had all these really great insights about how things work. Right now, I'm really excited about engineering and I would like to know a little bit more about the chemical structures that give us the batch limits, your limit formulas.⁶² I would like to know about the history behind that stuff. Right now I have a friend who is ...a lot like my English teacher. We have lunch every day and talk. He's in charge of the Ceramic Engineering White Wares Research Center. ...I use him as a technical sounding board for my class.

My class has to do...testing [of materials], but I also teach the empirical formulas.⁶³ So when we come down to... [exams], I do crazy tests. It's like open-book, open-mouth, which is probably based totally on dyslexia. But I think that you can learn more from a scavenger hunt than you can just trying to empty your head out. I have students that could be dyslexic. I'd probably know if they're dyslexic from the testing. ...They can [copy]... something right out of a book. ...That's fine with me.... That's part of the scavenger hunt and at that point they'd say: *"Oh yes! That's what*

⁶²Limit formulas indicate the maximum and minimum amounts of an oxide that can productively be used in a glaze at specific maturing temperatures.

⁶³The empirical formula is not a true chemical formula, but a method of representing a finished (or melted) glaze composition in terms of the relative amounts of oxides present for the purpose of calculation.

this means." You have a little bit of a chat about it...

Well, I'm trying to figure out how far we can push it. I would like to go into the next 50 years without us being just a mud and pottery institution. [There's a material that interests me] which has polymer in it. You could basically weave the thing-- it's so fluid, it's really great! ...You can put 60% clay in it and you can fire it back up-- So there's that type of stuff.... What I'm trying to do is figure out how to make the materials do different things so that we can make different art, as opposed to just put the clay in the mixer, add water, mix it up until it's a certain consistency.

... We've just applied for an education grant to figure out a way that we can get... the artists and the engineers to come together ...[to expand how the other thinks about materials. If the artists begin asking the sorts of questions the engineers ask and the engineers start asking art questions, both would benefit].

...I had a student who wanted to have a clay body that when cooling, would ...fracture into beautiful quartz fissures. That



Figure XIII: John Gill

turned out to be an assignment that my friend, Bill, gave to his engineering students to solve. The engineer said: *"Why does this artist want to do*

this? As an engineer, we're trying to get rid of this." Bill said: *"No. If you solve this problem, you'll know how to get rid of it by knowing more about ...how to cause it."* So the artists are asking these really hard questions and the engineers say: *"We never thought of it that way."* ...It took me a while to get to this place.... Do I know how to make any calibrations? No. Do I want to...? No. I want to date it; I don't want to marry it....

CA: Why do you like clay?

JG: I think I like clay because it's incorrigible, but then you can be kind to it, and it'll do some really nice things for you.

CA: How do you be kind to it?

JG: By letting it go through some of its own stages. That's like letting it stiffen up or trying to get some sort of breath into it. Some sort of respect. I love how dumb it is. It's like going through life thinking that you're dumb and then knowing that you're really not, and then playing with this clay that you know is just dumb dirt. It's going through some of the same sort of things I went through. Clay has a very funny educational process. It goes from a pile of dust-- it can dry out, it can get hard, you can chip it down. There's so many things you can do to it. You can work on a piece of clay for a long time.

...I would say, there's some things that you can't do with clay.

There was a guy who knocked a hole in a big piece of sculpture and started building wet clay off of it. It had already been fired and glazed! And then that thing went on another 12 feet!⁶⁴ I would have never done that. ...I figured out there's nothing you can't do to clay.

CA: Is there a relationship between your teaching and your experiences with dyslexia?

JG: There probably is. All people who teach here at Alfred... don't have the same problems that I have and they go in this wonderful kind of sequential order. ...Every once in a while, I jump out on a tangent because I don't know how well I follow this wonderful path that everyone else is on. Somebody ...said that one of the problems [of a piece] was weight and

⁶⁴This is an amazing feat, the scale being only part of the extraordinary achievement. Traditionally ceramists are taught that it is essential to maintain even moisture levels within a clay piece at all times. We are taught that wet clay cannot be added to already fired ceramics. Usually, this is true and the wet clay will just drop off, probably long before the second firing. I suspect that this student found a solution to this problem that involved some kind of fibres, either paper fibre (as in paperclay) or fiberglass, added to the parent clay body, but I do not know for certain.

This is not unlike the point Michael Sherrill made about how limiting it is to think in terms of 'dishwasher safe' when making sculpture. This also relates to John Gill's point about the positive mutual influence of the engineering and art students working on the same problems, thereby stretching each other's perceptions of the possible.

they're really talking about gravity. But the real problem with this sculpture was wait, which was time, it wasn't gravity. They didn't have enough 'wait,' they got to it too quick.

...What I've learned is that everything is basically based on pictures. I have images of what I talk about.... I listen to a lot of musicals or books on tapes. ...Every time I listen to them, they become a different story because I can make them [into] whatever I want.... I absolutely know I've said exactly the opposite things to different students and both times it was the truth.

CA: ...paradox?

JG: You have to understand paradox, but you also have to understand the different touches that certain students have. And so, I might have one student who is really, really, really loose, and I might have another student absolutely tight. ...[Each has to figure out how to approach a structure to make it work.]...

CA: You're talking about the richness, complexity of your understandings...?

JG: I don't know how you're gonna feel about this one: ...You could take all this waste, nuclear waste and you could ...turn it all into a glass. It would be a great way to contain it. It comes out to be this wonderful black

lava-glass. It's really beautiful! I asked a student, *"If you could summarize what your glass teachers would look like if they were a piece of glass..."*

And the answer was: *"They'd be very, very clear."*

I would not be very clear-- I will never, ever, ever be transparent.

CA: You're talking about fertile soil.

JG: I want fertile soil. I want something that's in there, that has some nutrients, has some sort of catch, that you don't know what it is, that you're able to keep on working your way around it.

...So that's what I want. ...I try to help students look all over the place for ways to solve problems.... I'm good at jumping all over the place, which is ...a funny way of working, but it gives you all kinds of unexpected possibilities for problem solving.

...When I [advise a student on] ...a thesis now, I have them just read them to me. So they sit there and they read it to me. I listen really, really well. Mr. Bunger⁶⁵ taught me how to do that. I listen to them, then I imagine what it could be and say: *"Were you trying to say this? Or were you trying to say this at the same time you were saying that?"* And I love the idea of double entendres.... I think that every statement that you ever make should be looked at as if it could be a double entendre. If you can [write] your thesis and write it so that it could be read by a child, a scholar

⁶⁵Don Bunger's interview is contained in the Appendices.

or an artist..., and it's like right-on-the-money, that's what it's all about.

I did not write my thesis. It's only 3 pages long; my wife wrote it.

The other thing is, people that have this problem, I think that they should find other people who are good at things [that they're not]. My wife's really great at reading. She reads all the time.... I have people in my studio that I work with, they tell me what they're reading and we always have really good conversations.

Summary:

John Gill was born in 1949 and grew up in rural Seattle, the third of eight children, four of whom are dyslexic. His father was an engineer. As a young child, he loved to build tunnels and tree houses, play baseball, soccer and Red Rover with his siblings and his neighborhood friends. However, he failed kindergarten and did very poorly in the second grade. By the third grade, he still could not read, and his grandmother, who was a teacher, recognized the curious inconsistencies in John's abilities. He could sit and draw highly detailed still lifes, but could not read nor write, and his handwriting was "chicken scratch." Classes were huge throughout grade school and children who did not do well were just pushed along. In the sixth grade, the children were expected to write long essays. John turned in twenty-six pages of garble and when the teacher asked him to read it, he could not remember what it was he was supposed to have written.

Shortly after this, as a result of "an incorrigible stunt" played on the principal of the school, he was sent to two schools for boys with behavioral

problems. John Gill's memories of these schools is mixed. He could not see his family or friends and he was beaten for poor spelling. However, he was also given singing lessons and taught how to prune plants, both of which have ever since been life-long passions of his. The school grounds were large and there were gardens and plenty of room to play, but no art classes. Some of the teachers were very interesting and told exciting stories about historical characters; history has also since been a strong interest.

By the time he was allowed to come home and enter a regular high school tenth grade, he was "starved for a chance to make an object, trying to understand what something was." John Gill already believed that making things was his way of understanding. This is an assumption that is often repeated in John Gill's accounts: "There was not enough of a picture in my mind" means that in order for him to understand, there must be an image in his mind and he gains this image by physically manipulating materials.

His high school was also a mixed blessing. John was able to study art, drama, music, and he sang in an a capella choir, all very successfully. But when he took a math course he ran into more problems with his teacher and was quickly expelled from the class.

Although undoubtedly John Gill often provoked his teachers, there were some teachers who responded with greater understanding and wisdom, making substantial efforts to hook John into learning on his own terms. A supportive English teacher, Don Bunger, realized that John could neither read nor write well, and therefore not only read the texts to him on his own time after school, but

allowed John to take notes and respond to texts by making sculptures. This worked remarkably well because both John and his classmates took his sculpture very seriously. The classmates came to respect the insightfulness of his contributions to the class discussions and admired his facility to make art.

After high school, John Gill attended a non-academic art school, earning straight A's. At the time, he thought he would work exclusively in bronze, using clay only as an intermediary step in the process. However in his second year, he took his first ceramics class. During our discussion, John Gill fondly recounted stories about the high quality of the ceramics teacher, who was extremely clear and well-organized. At this time, John Gill came to enjoy clay as an end in itself, rather than merely a means to another end.

After leaving art school, John Gill enrolled in the Kansas City Art Institute to study ceramics and there were considerable academic requirements. However because he sometimes received lower grades in these academic courses than graduate students were permitted, he was occasionally put on probation or expelled. Yet he was always eventually reinstated because of the quality of his artwork. One art history teacher publicly ridiculed John Gill's literacy in front of both peers and a visiting artist. So offensive was this teacher's comments that a fellow student reported the incident to the head of John Gill's department who intervened on his behalf. After this, John Gill was allowed to complete take home exams with generous time limits. He also developed mutually beneficial relationships with fellow students who could help him organize and write these examinations.

Throughout the interviews, John Gill discussed his somewhat ironic love of libraries. Because of his exceptional visual memory, he was able to memorize the locations of books on a wide variety of subjects in several large libraries. He would pour through these books, mostly looking at the headings and images, but not really reading the texts. However, John Gill developed friendships with faculty members and students who could discuss and vividly engage his imagination, thereby filling in the blanks in his contextual knowledge about the subject. John Gill recalls that one teacher would begin a story about an artwork that the teacher claimed to have seen. This teacher would describe the object or elaborate on some detail that would guide John Gill's research. Then, John would search and search for that object or similar objects, returning to the teacher for more information. The teacher would then supply another piece of information that would, again, suggest further areas for research. This was a particularly successful strategy because the hunt for this object became a game, a scavenger hunt, in which the objective was not only to further the students' research abilities and knowledge of ceramics history, but to instigate conceptual leaps in their thinking about objects.

Dyslexia has affected John Gill's own teaching methods. The model of the scavenger hunt was often repeated. For example, John Gill's glaze calculation examinations are open-book tests in which John Gill and his students may talk with one another during the examination. This type of examination, itself, is viewed as a teaching strategy and as an exercise in research skills

rather than proof that information has been committed to memory. Similarly, students whom John Gill supervises in their theses writing, read aloud to John Gill while he listens attentively. He maintains that a successful thesis should contain simultaneous meanings that can allow the thesis to be read on several levels at once. Word play, particularly with homonyms, is also a common element in John Gill's speech and critiques: Is the problem 'weight' as in gravity, or 'wait' as in time? In ceramics, either and both are possible. These puns are more than entertainment and more than indulging in his cleverness; they reveal a powerful striving for a richness and complexity of understanding that is essential to him. The frustrating irony about John Gill is that the usual roots to learning are more arduous for him, yet he is very intelligent and intensely desirous of that learning. Ceramics continues to fascinate him not only because of its moving and unfixed boundaries, but because this "dumb clay" can also be very subtle and very complex, not unlike him.

Part Three: Teacher/Studio Artists, Les Manning and Don Reitz

The last category is artist heaven. They enjoy the different types of flexibility prized by both teachers and entrepreneurs. Having taught in institutions, but now conducting workshops, these artists have many of the rewards of teaching, but the major drawback is not being able to get to know their students very well or see them progress over time. However, they can communicate with the public, positively influence teaching and learning and contribute to individual student's spark of discovery. Only responsible for those who want what they offer, they are neither accountable for reports to

administrators nor disinterested or reluctant learners. Not only can they teach when and where it is convenient, they travel and meet interesting people. The publicity and organization for these workshops is not usually their concern. These artists can concentrate on providing rich and useful learning experiences for the particular people involved.

Their artwork, when they work and what they make, is under their control; they can make objects that are interesting and meaningful to them. Likewise, they can show their work in public or private galleries and museums, selling it however they choose. Publishing is also according to their interests, and likely others will do the writing. Although the income generated by art sales and workshops is important, they also have pensions from their former institutions which provide that precious freedom to choose to work as they want, and with whom.

LES MANNING

Les Manning is a studio artist and teacher, and is most widely known for his work as Director of the Banff Center Ceramics Programme, Alberta, Canada. He is also known for making vessels by mixing differently-colored clays together and throwing vessel forms on the potters wheel, drawing his imagery from the stratifications and rock formations encountered while climbing in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. His work has been reviewed in *Ceramics Monthly*; *Contact: Ceramics from a Canadian Perspective*; *Ceramics, Art and Perception*; and *Ceramic Review*. His artwork appears in Ceramic Spectrum by Robin Hopper



Figure XIV: Les Manning

and Ceramic Technology for Potters and Sculptors by Yvonne Cuff. He is a member of numerous professional craft and ceramics organizations and has served on the board of directors in several of them. His work is in numerous collections, including

Art Bank, The Massey Collection in the Museum of Civilization, Ottawa and Fukaoka National Museum, Saga prefecture, Japan. In 1997, he was the recipient of the prestigious Canada Council 'A' Grant.

Since leaving the Banff Center, Les Manning splits his time teaching many workshops throughout the world and working in his own studio near Kingston, Ontario. He shows frequently in international juried exhibitions across Canada,

The United States, as well as Turkey, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, Hungary, Australia, Korea, Japan, The Czech Republic, and Egypt.

I met Les Manning in 1985 when I was a Resident at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, Ceramics Programme. Neither of us was aware of the others' dyslexia until very recently. I spoke with Les at his home and studio near Kingston, Ontario, May 13th. 2000

Les Manning grew up on a small and very remote cattle ranch in central eastern Alberta in the Prairies. He and his twin brother were the youngest of six children. The eldest siblings, two girls, were much older and had moved out of the house when the younger boys were still small.

Of the adults in his life, Les speaks very lovingly of his father and maternal grandfather, who were socialists and had very strong convictions concerning an individual's responsibility towards the community. These male role-models were voracious readers and, especially the grandfather, wonderful orators. Les's grandfather, urged his grandchildren to think clearly and form cogent opinions on the wider world of politics, history and ethics. Les's father was also very fond of movies and, therefore, the children saw more movies than was usual in that community.

Les Manning's relationship to his fraternal twin was very important to him because he always had a playmate and confidant, a partner in games and the many chores that were expected of farm children in the 1940's and 50's. The children had many serious responsibilities around the farm, such as feeding and

watering animals or tending vegetables. As children on a small family farm, they were not strangers to tools, machinery and making useful things from scraps of wood or other things that had outlived their usefulness. When not engaged in their farm duties, the two children would disappear for hours on horseback, racing at high speed over the prairie, reenacting exciting scenes from movies or comic strips:

LM: ... Magic, pure magic. We lived on a place that had a creek...
[which] ran into these twin lakes.... We felt very much at home; we each had our own lake. So we were each ... in charge of our own ocean.
... We could make a pirate ship...or we could be anything we wanted to be.
Then in ...the higher parts of our property, which were dry..., There were sand blowouts that were just about three or four acre patches. ...They were like a desert and they'd have little sand dunes on them. We could be Lawrence of Arabia.... When we played, it was on horseback. We were Genghis Khan and his army.... We knocked each other off horses doing jousting events, like they would in the old knights in shining armor from the Crusades. Dangerous. I don't know how we didn't keep from killing ourselves.... I guess our parents were busy enough that they didn't realize we were up to, quite, such exciting things....

For Les, art was very important because he wasn't very good at other school subjects.

LM: ...Art was absolutely a saving grace.... School was ...[an awful] struggle. The struggle was because of my inability to understand things and put them into a context.... Other people do these things easily. ...Too shy... [to admit that I didn't understand], ...I struggled along, ... saying "yes" when they asked if I understood something, [but I] ...really didn't. [I would] be foolish, and try and pretend [that I understood like the other children, hoping to avoid] ...confrontation. ... I think I always had a fear of somebody realizing that I wasn't understanding, ...[being] deemed stupid or something, right? Which all of us tend to do, ...those that have problems learning. When I say problems learning, ...I think it went on too long to be just lack of attention because I really did try very hard to learn. So it wasn't just being lazy....

...I'm a visual reader, ...exceptionally ...[visually-oriented]. I can... [easily grasp and retain, ideas that are presented in images], painting, sculpture, films, plays, television or whatever. I can pick up volumes of stuff. ...I can just soak it away. I'm the best trivia buff you can find to play *Trivial Pursuit* with because I know all the garbage, but I don't know anything about really good hard stuff [like mathematics and science]....

I had an art teacher in grade 7 who was extremely excited about the possibilities that I was showing.... We had cue cards: "*Who were these great painters?*" I would know the correct names immediately

because I could see [and distinguish between] the styles [of the different artists and the kinds of] ... marks they'd make.... It was...natural...[for me] because a visually-presented concept for me is like--I can grasp it easier than anything....

CA: Did your brother have trouble in school?

LM: It's a hard one to answer. He was good in the things I wasn't. ...Now he has all sorts of mechanical sensibility: he's a heavy-duty mechanic. He has a special welding certificate. ...He was really creative, and so on the one hand ...he's maybe more academic and could handle ...mathematics and stuff related to all the mechanical processes, but he's also a very abstract thinker as well.

Les described his difficulty de-coding the printed word, and the frustration caused by the mismatch between his ability to understand ideas and the slow pace of accessing information through print. He also described a method used by many dyslexics when reading, pronouncing each word silently to themselves:

LM: When I would read something I would have ...[difficulty] in understanding the words, not the meaning, ...but ...how to pronounce them. I was always intimidated, ...unbelievably intimidated that I would say the word wrong. [If you mispronounce a word, some people assume

that you don't know the meaning of the word and will embarrass you].... To escape it, I would [try to say it fast], just fuzz it over in some way. But [this would only emphasize the error]; I would concentrate on words too long.

I can read, but I read so slowly.... Other people will just read through a page and go: "*Oh yeah! Okay.*" They grasp it, while I'm still [reading]... and so it's a long drawn out process. But then because [I'm quick in other ways], I have a great imagination. So my imagination will start working with those words I've already read, ...creating a story [about what's going on]. ...So when I read something, I really get the impact of it. But I get totally bored with reading because I'm so conscious of even pronouncing the words properly *to myself*⁶⁶.

When I write, I write very-- just a stream of consciousness-- and usually ... it's a very long-winded way to get to the point. Sometimes I start with a main point and then the explanation of it. [But] the sentences are often... structured backwards. It's a very hard process....

... With numbers I'm even worse. I flip numbers. If you give me a telephone number and the first three digits, I will flip the last two of those first three digits on a seven-digit phone number. I do this so consistently that when I phone and get a wrong number, I just re-flip those two numbers and ...get the right number. ...I do it all of the time. It's a real thing that I do. ...Even giving people a phone number, I'll ...say: "*Woops,*

⁶⁶Snowling & Nation, 1997, reported that the greatest context effect was for dyslexic readers. In addition, Les Manning also illustrates the unusual brain activity during reading in the speech centers of the brain by even compensated dyslexic readers (Paulesu, et al ,1996). When reading, the dyslexics are pronouncing the words silently.

I'm sorry. Wait a minute, I gotta read this back to you." I always try and read back every time because I will constantly flip numbers.

School life was not all bad, however. In the seventh grade, Les had two talented teachers, the art teacher already mentioned and an English teacher. The English teacher taught poetry with an emphasis on understanding the feeling expressed in poetry. This captured Les's imagination:

... We'd have to learn how to examine what the artist was talking about..., and I absolutely went crazy over that, I mean it made so much sense...! This was really, truly an incredible, expressive way of talking about something... I just devoured the poetry, ...[took it] really seriously.

CA: Could you tell me a little about the bluffing. You said you bluffed in school?

LM: You can bluff ... through things so much you can make yourself sick. That's exactly what I did. I would find it so hard to keep up with homework.... It wasn't ...disinterest. I had interest in other things and had interest in coming at problems from other directions. But I wouldn't be able to understand ...[mathematics], couldn't understand the formula or...[an] algebraic... equation.... After looking at Islamic tiles, I wish now that I understood it, because you can see the application [of that kind of system]. That's what I wasn't seeing in those early stages.

I would just put myself in a horrible corner where I would resist it and resist it. It wasn't out of laziness because [I worked very hard at things that interested me]. I had a passion for things. Those things that I didn't have passion for, I would put off, and ...in doing that I would get into so much trouble. I would always, when I say bluff, I would pretend that I knew it. They would be convinced up to a point, until they saw the exam. Then when the... exam [scores came out], I would be physically ill because I knew *I just bombed*. I mean, really bombed. ...The teachers got me through, though, and made sure that I was in a situation with marks according to what I needed to get into art school.

Les distinguished between the kind of learning that occurs in elementary or high school and the kind of learning where the source is experience in the real world:

LM: I found reading really hard and slow and I would grow bored with it really fast, but I could learn more by doing outside chores. When you live in a rural situation you have to be a caretaker. A caretaker for animals, no matter what age you are, [the chores must be done in a proper sequential order], ... if you don't do that [the consequences are dire].... Something could die. So it's clear what your duties were.... [In addition, it is essential to keep in mind the interaction of the various factors influencing an animal's welfare, and make sound predictions based upon what you know

about an animal's behavior, the direction of wind, the condition of equipment, etc.] Like weather, you had to be somewhat aware of what was coming and put animals away [if a storm were coming].

Information also came from images and Les compared the images in books to his experience of the world around him:

LM: I loved looking at pictures. Now I also have to remind you that I grew up in a period when comic books were... the biggest rage. That was pre-television, so I didn't have access to television 'til I was like 15 or 16 years-old. So stories by pictures were fantastic. Man, I could flip through them and get more information! ...That provided the mystery of cultures and other places. I loved those things, whether it was Tarzan in the jungle in Africa to-- whatever, it didn't really matter, whether it was science-fiction or-- The artists were extremely fine artists... and had these amazing skills.

... All those years in the Rocky Mountains, I kinda started to think that... the person who had drawn the comic strip '*Sargent Preston, the Northwest Mounted Police and his Dog, King*'-- I thought this guy wasn't really paying attention to the mountains. They aren't like that [in the Rockies], right? But little did I know that mountains are different every place you go. So this comic strip took place in the Klondike [Mountains] and then I had a workshop in White Horse, and I saw all those valleys or

those long rows of very low mountains. Actually the artist was incredibly accurate in...[his rendering]. So in my later years, I was apologizing to this artist for thinking to myself that he wasn't ...paying attention. ...Stories of *Bambi* and all that, I thought, "*This man is mad!*" If you live in the Alberta prairies and you've never been anywhere else, there's no forest, all those ferns and stuff. Until my first visit to Vancouver, I thought that stuff doesn't exist. For me this visual reading was an exceptional learning process.

For Les Manning, understanding people's behavior was just as important as grasping the significance of wind direction or images from pictures. Furthermore, learning from people involved more than direct experience of events as he incorporated others' experiences. These stories played a large role in his learning:

LM: I'm a real people person. As a twin, I had a real connection with people right from the womb. ...I really like being around people and I like the notions people have. I used to love the sensibility and sensitivity of people like my father and grandfather. My grandfather said: "*Well, it's gonna be cold tomorrow because the cattle are drinking more.*" [Some farm animals] won't drink on a cold day and they prepare themselves [for the coming cold by drinking more]. I think this kind of ...visual [observational] learning ...is one thing we have lost track of in an academic world, ...even in the art world. [It's a shame because it's]...an incredibly

vital and valuable part of how we learn to express ourselves,...how we learn to read things.

CA: Les, there's a couple of interesting things that you brought up. You talk about your shyness and make reference to your peers being unkind, but also talk about liking people? Those are interesting things to put together. Could you tell me a little more about that?

LM: ... When I was younger... I'd have an extremely hard time being alone. I mostly attribute that to being a twin, that insecurity when you don't have a partner handy. ... But if...[being a twin] is the strongest reason, I think the second, almost matching, one was a thirst for information. I think we know in ourselves where our limitations are... and even though I had access to a lot of material (My dad was a great reader and there was always stuff around available to read), people tell you things, stories....

CA: Tell me a little bit more about your family. You mentioned that your dad was an avid reader....

LM: My dad was a real romantic,...[a socialist], and the two people who influenced me ...the most in my life were my grandfather... and my dad. They believed that we should share everything with everybody.... There wasn't much coming in, but they always gave everything away that they

possibly could-- just to make sure someone else had what they had....

...Those two people also had a tremendous passion for other cultures, other places, and the mysteries that the world held. So there was always exciting stimulation. My grandfather's biggest comment to ...throw us off when we were smaller was to say: "*What do you think of the emancipation of the Hottentots?*" As if we were going to know, right? All of these things, I always looked up. I always found out what he was talking about because I knew that he wasn't just imagining these things, that he had a reason for saying them.... So I'd look them up to find out who are these people and what happened to them... Oral tradition was really a rich thing in my family....

I'm making all this sound very romantic and fair, but we did grow up in an era when children were to be seen and not heard. ...At times I ached to participate, but couldn't. [With my parents, it was also that]...it was such a long day...[on the farm], a long, physical day.... When there was work to be done, there was a lot of it and you just fell in bed exhausted every night and got up very early the next morning to do the same thing over again. ...It was not a non-caring atmosphere; ...there was just not a lot of time for each person.

CA: It sounded from what you said as though you recognized some sort of difference about yourself. Am I reading something into that?

LM: ...Maybe [everyone feels that way], but yes, I really thought I was different because there were certain things that I couldn't-- I was good at ...art, geography or things like that--subjects other people seem to have a really hard time with, or disinterest in. ...I couldn't really do all that well in math or in science, but I was still interested in them. ...If I had known the abstract side, instead of just the basic memorization skills which was how it was taught at that particular time-- if I could've maybe understood the [principles involved in the subject and how they are manifested in the real world], maybe I'd have done better. But that was never brought to my attention 'til much, much later-- very late in the education process. I probably learned things in later life, because I could see the purpose.

I have a strange way of doing things. I never really pay attention to something until I understand the purpose of it. [For example,] I told you earlier about traveling: I'll go to someplace and see it, and come back and read about it. I think a lot of people [do it the other way around]. I think I did that with a lot of subjects. If I couldn't see the application, I... drowned. ... So I ...bluffed my way through school a tremendous amount.

Then, as I said, I had this art teacher in grade 7 and again in grade 10-- it was a really prime time. She took an interest in helping me. [I returned to her class in grade 10] ...in a very embarrassing way. I was so poor in French, ...much to my regret ever since... that I was bringing the class average down. The principal made a deal with me to leave the French class and take art instead: *"...You have full marks in art already,*

just go to the art class and that way we can bring our average of the teaching process in French language up to par with the other schools.”

Sometimes it pays off to be a drag. Anyway, ...whatever was happening in that [learning] process that I was unable to capture, I certainly came through 100% in [art]....

This remarkable art teacher realized that Les was doing poorly in his academic courses, knew that he would probably take an extra year to pass all his requirements for grade 12. Therefore she helped set up a plan whereby Les would start taking courses at Alberta College of Art after grade 11. Thus, Les Manning graduated from high school with some art school credits towards his intended painting degree already completed. Les's parents were, however, apprehensive about art school and did not believe that this was a sensible major for a young man. This art teacher and her husband picked Les up at home, “waved goodbye with me to my parents” and drove him the 300 miles to Calgary. They registered him in the art school and organized a place for him to live.

LM: ...After I was in art school the first year, you couldn't have dragged me away from the place until the four years were over, no matter what happened relative to marks or anything like that.

Although Les Manning thoroughly enjoyed this new phase of his life, he had a great deal to learn:

LM: I did well enough [in drawing and painting] to excite people around a small community..., [but when] I got into art school and talked to kids who had already three years of art in high school, they were talking about things I couldn't even understand, didn't know about....

But then, in his second year of art school, Les took a ceramics course which accented his strengths in a particularly powerful way. His learning style and intellectual strengths were well-suited to three-dimensional art, clay, and particularly pottery. The practical application of knowledge typical of ceramics melded smoothly with Les's rural roots. "On a farm, everything has a purpose." He loved pottery with its emphasis on the useful and functional. Les Manning saw throwing on the potter's wheel as a special kind of three-dimensional drawing. Not only was this new kind of drawing geared towards making objects that were beautifully designed, sensual, and expressive of emotion, Les also attributes the vast improvement in his drawing on paper to his discovery of the potter's wheel. Buyers of Les's work now, often ask to buy the drawings for the pieces as well.

After art school, Les became an apprentice in a production pottery, which gave him practical experience while earning some money. In retrospect, Les is thankful for the three years he spent at the pottery, honing his skills. However, it was also dull work, continually throwing the same forms day after day, a grind not unlike school. Yet even in this 'treadmill existence', he learned to be respectful of the material:

LM: ...You can't cheat the material in any way, so there was no -- I guess that's what I liked about it-- there was no way of going back to this bluffing situation....

CA: I'm seeing a pattern from when you were a child feeding animals, doing chores, and then you recognize that again in clay, that you can't bluff. The animals are fed or they are not. You're either working the clay in a way that is going to function or not. Again in your 7th grade poetry class with the words, you wanted the words to be economical, functional and expressive. You wanted there to be a really good reason for them to be there, and in poetry it's a distillation of experience, it's essence.

Les answered that you can't know what you are talking about until you've had practical real world experience. He says that you can read about something and learn about a thing's character, appreciate on some level it's qualities. But this does not give you a full, whole-body understanding:

LM: I just find it doesn't seem to be as deep a meaning ...as something that you really practice,... working with it. You can understand ...as a collector..., but until you actually use it, I'm not sure you can KNOW... With me, there's an intuitive process and that intuitive process is crucial to one's well-being. There's something natural just going on and something really clicks.... Maybe it's only the fact that you just really like something,

but for me art isn't just that intellectual property....

... I find art and particularly clay art extremely therapeutic; I can be a mental mess and I could sit down and make two or three objects and be totally-- maybe healed is ...too strong-- but I can be soothed in a way that allows the healing process to start. I don't know what that magic is....The first year I was in art school, I didn't even go near the place. I didn't even know it existed. ...As soon as I found it in second year, I was daydreaming in my painting class-- and that's why I went to art school; I was going to be a painter. When I found clay, I thought it's like alchemy. You can take this glaze-- it's a powder; stick it in the kiln and it comes out [with] this almost gem-like quality. I just thought, this is just pure magic, and the seduction of that....

(Long pause)... Just trying to get around this point of... finding your chosen material and getting to the depths of its meaning. With my own art, I selected a format-- an influence from nature: landscape. Canadian art is criticized as being boring because it's so based in landscape. ... We're surrounded by so much of it, ... these lonely spaces of ... the Canadian North. ...This isn't heavy intellectual stuff. It's just basic observation of space relationships, but then I think how many people have never been to the high country. How could they understand the language? How many people know about that space...? ...This concept of conquering the mountain is such a ridiculous thing because you're so fragile, a little wimp of a spot on the top of that summit. Really, the

question is, "How quickly can you get down, now?", because it's such an intimidating place to be. ...If the truth be known, you don't want to be there long 'cause it's a hostile environment....

And yet, it is quite significant in terms of the feeling you have from it. It gave me an incredible sense to do climbing, which I thought was idiotic before I actually tried to do it. ...I did it because I wanted to learn more about what it was that I was trying to represent in the art work....

... When I went to art school, I thought, "*Wow this is great, I can create something new every day.*" But really, you don't. And then when I went to work at the pottery, it was mix the clay, wedge the clay, fire the clay, glaze the clay, fire it again, take it out, start again. That's no different from farming...: plant the crop and reap it, harvest and do it again. Mountain climbing really gave me the absolute honest answer to all of that. You get to that summit with all of this amazing excitement just like planting a crop, thinking we're gonna grow the greatest wheat ever. You get to the summit and you're almost paralyzed by the beauty.... It can be a wheat field , ...a good firing... or the summit of this mountain.

... *The thing was that I had absolutely no idea how difficult it was to come down.* You know when you have an exhibition and opening night's so grand, the next day you go into this depression and you say: "*Oh! My God! Why did I put that piece of shit in there?*" And when you ask yourself that, you're just coming down off the mountain. I had such an absolute direct association [between being an artist and mountain

climbing]. As I came down off that mountain, sometimes putting my body in the wrong position ...over a very precarious spot. I just thought to myself: *"Man, this is where the real answers are!"* This is coming off your mountain.... There's no applause, there's no nothing. It's you and

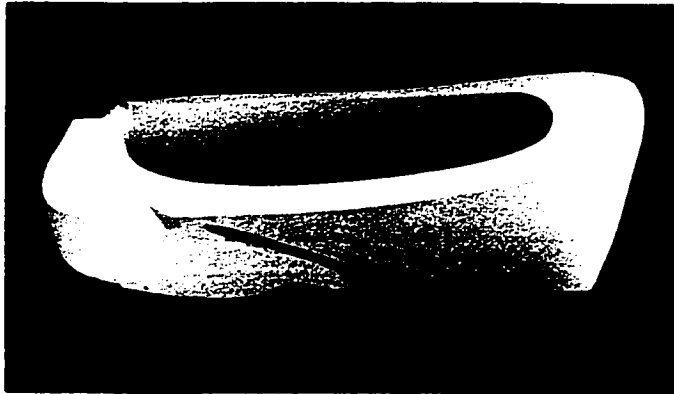


Figure XV: Les Manning

whatever it was you have just done. ...How are you going to get back safely...? That piece of poetry... Earl Bernie's *David*, ...when I climbed afterwards I

understood every bloody thing he said. The ...skull of the mountain sheep is there, the sure-footed can even slip sometimes... Nothing goes through the world...unscathed in some way....

...People look at the mountains from the bottom up and they think they're just pyramids and points. But really, up in that space, there are snow bowls that are no different than porcelain bowls. ...So it's the language of a potter. ...I found a balance there that just absolutely blew me away.

...It's funny how those elements follow you and you may recognize them and you may not. ...It was a realization after doing it. I did start to make those pots before I went climbing, but the climbing completely cemented the whole idea in a very clear way. ...People ask me why do I

make pots out of those images? Why don't I just make sculpture? If I made sculpture, I'd be just relating only one aspect. [I'd be losing the]... potter's language, [that interest in containment], ...inside-out. There are hardly any other artists that have any more information of INSIDE. We work from the inside out... [and have] that sensibility of interior [spaces].

CA: Could you tell a little more about the soothing relationship to Making?

LM: ...What attracts us to any specific media? Some people can find it in, maybe, hairdressing... -- the feelings come from the rightness [of the fit] of the material.... They've done work with children with disabilities and stuff, put them on horses and the relationship to the animal is healing. ...There's something healing about that [mutually respectful relationship]. [The right material has] very similar attributes. I find that wedging⁶⁷ the clay for me. People say: "*Oh my God! That's archaic. Why do you wedge your clay...?*" That well-produced clay is generic. I always have to doctor my clay up, because I want to...[remove] that generic condition....

I teach wedging, not just for conditioning the clay, but something about a psychological process of learning about the material. ...Wedging

⁶⁷Wedging clay is a method of de-airing the clay and mixing together the various clays that make up the particular clay body. When ceramists mix up their own clay bodies without the benefit of a 'pug' or de-airing and mixing machine, this is essential. Many potters now no longer wedge because it can be hard on the wrists and packaged clays are already thoroughly de-aired and mixed.

soothes me with the material, and it gives me [information] about the clay, so that I know how to handle it when I sit down at the wheel. ...I massage the material to get it into the shape I need it to be in shape to express what I want to express. But it massages me at the same time and that's what we're really talking about, a oneness. ...It may only be touching my hands, but my whole body is linked to it....

What I'm trying to line up for people is their opportunity to come into some grace with the material that is respectful.... I have an immense respect for clay simply because it took a very long time for it to get here. We're talking about an age that we can't, in our feeble little human minds, understand. [It took forever for it to go from rock to clay]; ...yet we can turn it back to stone in two days. Somehow that's a godly act that I think we've disrespected pretty seriously--look around at all the... [dead art]! ...You gotta learn, but you don't have to kill the clay in the process...?

...Clay is an awkward [material]There're a lot easier vehicles, but there's something soothing.... I don't want to sound corny about it, but as soon as I started handling clay, I felt a oneness with it and I don't know how to articulate.... There's something inherent in the material that gives you that power if you want to treat it in that way.... There's something about the process of learning that comes with the territory, and I think we ... need that territory. ...It's learning through process....

CA: ... You earn that relationship to the material with this work / process? You mean that by paying the price in sweat, you learn how to value, respect the material?

LM: ...My pieces are exceptionally laboured..., but there are pieces that I really value that are made with just a simple gesture, a poetic way of handling the material. ...[Even so], the artist must spend ...time learning. The gesture has to be so repeated and understood, that -- you have to know the volume of the line....

Les continued that it takes time and hard work even to know what interests you, what the material can do and how to coax that material into doing what it can do. The rightness of fit between the learner and material, the relationship between the learner's earned skills and interests and the material's qualities, is soothing.

CA: 'Clay isn't the easiest of materials', why did you persist?

LM: ...I love it too much. ...I can have five firings in a row that will be just *bastard* things,...I'd swear to god ...never to touch this bloody material again, but within two or three days I'm apologizing, right back at it, right up to my nose in it.... It's a ...love affair, absolutely.I've got such a passion for clay, ceramics, the people who do it and so on. I've dedicated my whole bloody life to it...at great [personal] cost...--my partners, my

children.... Thank god, some of them still love me for it, and can see and realize what it was that I was trying to prove while they probably weren't getting the attention they certainly deserved....

CA: Tell me about Banff. Tell me about when you first went to Banff.

LM: Banff was an absolute gift. ...I didn't even know what I had [at first]. Gradually, I grew into realizing the power of something like that. I truly and honestly say to you, I did not understand my power or what I was in charge of. I just did it with such a passion. In fact, I think I was absolutely a fool for not taking a more-- I'm trying to think of a word that would describe taking that stand-back attitude-- I really believed that it could have been more than it was, even though what it was, was really powerful.

When I went to art school, my teacher was designing a new facility for the Alberta College of Arts and I was really impressed [with the process].... I thought: *"I wonder if I'll ever get a chance to do that?"* [When I came into this situation, Banff was a summer program]. The studio ...was so absolutely disorganized and it wasn't as big as this living room...[with] overstuffed chairs...[that took up so] much space. What are they for? Nobody is sitting in a lounge chair thinking about working on clay....

... By the end of the summer just tidying up, [I had turned it into] a functioning space.... Then I said to the director, *"You gotta have this, and*

you gotta add this because that's what these people need if you're gonna get the results you want." Fortunately there was already a move ...to expand The Center into ...a full-year program. We knew it wasn't going to be academic in the sense that we weren't going to ... offer a diploma, ... or anything like that. It was intended to be an interaction, an exchange between artists. We had precedents in art education--apprenticeship or the mentor model, but this was to be a mentorship that was interactive, sharing ideas--mentoring amongst colleagues....

At the time I arrived, the visual arts were spread over several buildings]--...painting took place in one building, clay took place in another.... [But we decided that we needed a dedicated visual arts building]. I got to do the Ceramics Department and it was absolutely amazing experience. By that time, I'd been to England, saw the ceramics factories, had that three years of apprenticeship under my belt, so I knew [that there is a] traffic flow to a clay process. ...I wanted to keep the studio design totally flexible: shelves on wheels, ...keep it clean, keep it open, keep it fluid and so I got to design all that into it.

... I asked [those at the Alberta College of Art]...what ...they wouldn't do again if they had it to do over again. [I made mistakes and some areas were too small]. But eventually, ...[corrections were made].

...Then with the programming: ...we started off with 20 to 25-year-old people and summer programs with instruction. [It evolved into a more interactive situation. We still brought people in to lecture, [there wasn't] a

preset agenda to the program. We wanted artists to pursue their own directions, interacting with other guest artists....

Les Manning was pleased with how rapidly the program matured into an international professional residency. He continued by saying that over and over he heard the artists in residence at the Banff Centre say that one of the most powerful things provided by the Centre was a community of fellow artists, supporting each other. This mutual support network made it possible for the artists to have the courage to keep plugging away at their art:

LM: ... Sometimes you spend your whole life just scraping by and even though you might be really celebrated and have made a great contribution to society, it doesn't mean that... [your finances are in good shape.] But people would come together in residency, knowing that others were also struggling, put their arms around each other's shoulder and say, "That's enough for me, I can go back to work now...." ...I mean, there's no great intellectual thing about it, it's just a safe haven....

CA: You also mentioned the other night when we were talking: *a safe place to fail*. The freedom to take some pretty heavy risks....

LM: ...It was so secure and so powerful an experience that we were all *mad*. Mad scientists trying to figure this out. We could trust ...that this environment was a safe zone.... You can try something and, success or failure, people will admire that try.

...It's just the trust of Self. When I look at myself and think of what we've talked about in terms of learning disabilities..., I don't know how we teach our youth to trust themselves. I had things that I wanted to do, like I was so into function for the reasons that I said to you about coming out of a rural existence and knowing what function was.... I went through all these experiences and when I got into clay, I found this wonderful relationship to function. I made the objects useful and yet they were still art. ...The thing with this trust idea is that when I first got into this production studio,... [I had these good ideas about design for a coffee mug]. It had a broad foot so it wasn't gonna knock over easy, had a curve at the top where it bulged inwards so it would not allow coffee grounds to roll into...-- you know you get a mouthful of coffee grounds at the end of the last sip.... Now...[I was watching a TV talk show and the guest went to pick up his coffee mug and because of the poor design of the handle, the guest spilled coffee on himself]. I'm thinking: *"Ya' scald your guest on your show! I've got the cup for you; I should send it."* And again, courage! ... I just didn't have enough guts.

CA: ... Several times you've mentioned the importance of your roots, and allowing people to be who they are. It is important to know who you are in order to have the courage to trust yourself?

LM: ... I remember always being told...to mind my manners. That I'd have to work for somebody to survive and so needed to learn ...to cope with people.... It took me so long before I realized that I have a voice, I have the right to express myself in whatever way I choose to do it.

... I was also crippled by these learning disabilities-- they would be discovered as learning disabilities now, but weren't then. Maybe I was just a lazy twit.... I don't think so. I've passions about things.... I made clothes when I was a kid, first out of paper. I'd put them on and take one step and they'd tear apart... It wasn't a waste of time 'cause I really enjoyed putting them together. I made my own shirts in high school, because I loved to sew. I love any kind of pattern and putting things together. That's always been intriguing. Imagination ran riot because there was so much to discover in our environment. The only way we could entertain ourselves was by discovering.

CA: What has a learning disability to do with your success? Or does it?

LM: I wanted to get beyond it, to prove that I'm not as dumb as I look. Prove that I wasn't as dumb as some people measured me. For me it was a lot of things because it wasn't only that, but I had to find a way to prove to people that I did have value. I really wanted to make a contribution....

... Intimidation: ...My awkwardness in French, has always bothered me. The world got opened to me because of art, wide open. I've had the

opportunity to be significantly engaged in 34 different countries and I can't speak a word of another language. ...My children can pick up languages [easily]. I'm just so afraid to say something because I don't want to be offensive in pronouncing things in the wrong way. ...I can do that even with English. So jokingly, I've said many times that English is like my second language 'cause visual language is my first language and people think that's so outrageously funny. But in a way it's really true..., I am so easily intimidated because I do feel deficient in so many ways....

I think I understand a lot of things about the world, as much as a lot of people, and I'm passionate about it-- but ... I really admire people who ... are efficient with the language, use the nuances [of language well]....

CA: You have a huge respect for communicating and feel not up to the task? But in all the time I've known you, you've never appeared tongue-tied.

LM: ...It's a total challenge. ...I realized pretty quickly once things started to happen at Banff that I wasn't prepared at all. ...Because I read so slowly, I can get confused really fast. ...[Writing the speech was a problem, reading it in front of an audience was a problem]. ...I had to be able to ad lib it. I had to go with the flow, and I learned to just put down some points and hope ...I remembered enough. But fear sometimes gives you a memory block. So I had these two things just coming at me, like vultures, every time I looked at the... audience.

But when I started doing workshops, the security of my wheel was amazing. I could sit behind the wheel and had such confidence with what I could throw that I could talk and banter back and forth. ...You could not intimidate me. Then I got so courageous, I could stand up *beside* my wheel. And then I got even more courageous, I could stand *in front of* my wheel. After that, there were no holds barred. But I practiced and I had two good mentors [who listened to what I was going to say and helped me to explain myself more clearly, made suggestions and encouraged me....] ...They were generous, kind, open people that I could really relate to.

CA: You talk a lot about service and contribution. I'm trying to draw that thread into it.

LM: That is extremely important to me... It's about giving. ...My dad and my grandfather both impressed on me that my own well-being doesn't really matter, but a contribution to mankind does.... I doubt...somehow that I will ever make a contribution in the rest of my life ... as what I had the opportunity to do in Banff. To me that's a real contribution....

...This is really important to me. I never expected to have the opportunity to make a contribution. I was so proud at Banff to be the only native Alberta faculty member and I was probably one of the few Albertans that worked there in the history of Banff. ...It was important to me to make a difference and it was even more rewarding to make a difference on my own home turf....

Summary:

Les Manning grew up in the 1940's and 50's on a cattle ranch in the Alberta Prairies. He was very influenced by his father and grandfather, who being socialists, impressed upon Les the individual's responsibility to the community. In fact, the interrelationship of the concepts of service, usefulness and responsibility repeat themselves in every aspect of Les Manning's life from his own art-making to his teaching and work at the Banff Centre.

Responsibility on the farm meant that chores were done or the consequences were serious and immediately apparent. Animals would die or machinery destroyed if Les and his twin brother were neglectful. Farm life, also, reinforced an admiration for function and usefulness. Everything from the design of handles on milk pails to the farm cats had to serve a purpose. Furthermore, service to the community meant that self-sacrifice was necessary if the community as a whole were to be healthy. Les saw his father and grandfather give things away that they themselves needed so that others would share in their good fortune.

Elementary school and high school were very difficult for Les Manning. He had terrible trouble with reading and math; numbers were, and still are, a particular torment to him. Les describes bluffing in school. Fearing to be thought stupid, he managed to convince his teachers that he understood something that he did not. This would work until it was time for a test. In hindsight, Les Manning believes that if he had known "the abstract side", the principles and contexts, instead of just having to memorize disconnected facts, he would have done much

better in school. “The struggle was to understand things and put them into a context.” To this day, Les says that when he travels, he tends to look at the maps and read about the place only after he has returned—that he has to know why, the purpose of the learning, first. Similarly, now that he has seen Islamic tiles, he wishes he knew more about mathematics. For a child like Les, seeing the tiles might have been an important reinforcement for the mathematics that he found so difficult.

However, Les Manning was always a visual ‘reader’ and thinker. Les believes that he learns fastest when he is interacting directly with the subject matter. Perhaps this is not merely the sensory reinforcement of the learning, but because the purpose of this kind of learning is very clear, as it occurs in context complete with immediately available consequences. He distinguished the learning in elementary school from learning on the farm. He had absolutely no trouble fulfilling his duties on the farm in the proper sequential order, playing imaginative, narrative games with his twin brother, or in school with art, art history or geography. In addition, he picked up enormous amounts of information from pictures, comic books, movies, and things he saw and experienced on the farm.

From his father and grandfather, Les learned to love oral history, speech-making and all forms of story-telling. Uncomfortable himself with verbal communication, Les nonetheless responds strongly to well-crafted words and speech. Any subject in school that was approached through narratives, like history or literature (especially poetry), was especially fascinating for him. Les

Manning associates his need for communication with his love of story-telling. Despite often feeling shy or intimidated because of his dyslexia, Les knew that people could tell him things that he desperately wanted to know.

Les Manning has very fond memories of two particularly inspirational teachers. One of them taught poetry, which captivated him with the depth of the feeling that could be expressed. The other teacher taught art, and seeing the potential Les demonstrated, took extraordinary measures to help him get through high school and into art school.

In the second year of art school, Les discovered ceramics and immediately began a life-long passionate love with clay. Les discussed the importance of the right fit of the material as soothing. He found the ease of expression in clay particularly seductive. In addition, the emphasis in ceramics on function was familiar: "Everything on the farm has a function."

The imagery that repeats itself continually in his artwork refers to the Rocky Mountains. The bluffing in school, the farm chores and the association with mountain-climbing are all closely associated for Les Manning with the nature of the clay. Clay used to be a mountain and can be returned to stone in a kiln. More importantly, there's no bluffing possible. Working in clay, the day after an opening of an exhibition, or mountain-climbing, "there's no applause, there's no nothing. It's you and whatever you've done and ...how're you going to get back safely."

For Les Manning, this love of the clay with its soothing properties fuses with his convictions about service and his experiences as a dyslexic learner to

inform his teaching. Les talks about trying to “line up for people an opportunity to come into grace with the material that is respectful.... There’s something about the process of learning that comes with the territory, and I think we...need that territory.” Learning through process, direct experience is essential. Just as essential was his insistence that the Ceramics Programme at Banff would be a safe place, a place where it was safe to be passionate, look silly, make mistakes, risk failure, but still be respected and admired for trying. From feeling intimidated about making mistakes, Les designed the ceramics program to instill a trust in the artists’ own resources, knowing that other artists are out there doing the same, giving them the courage to get up and keep going.

DON REITZ

If the United States had National Living Treasures, "clay master" (*Clay Times*, January 1996, p. 5) Don Reitz would be among them. He is widely acknowledged as primarily responsible for the advent in the United States of wood and salt⁶⁸ firing methods that produce vibrant colors through the use of slips⁶⁹, stains⁷⁰, engobes⁷¹ and fuming⁷². His monumental vessels and plates

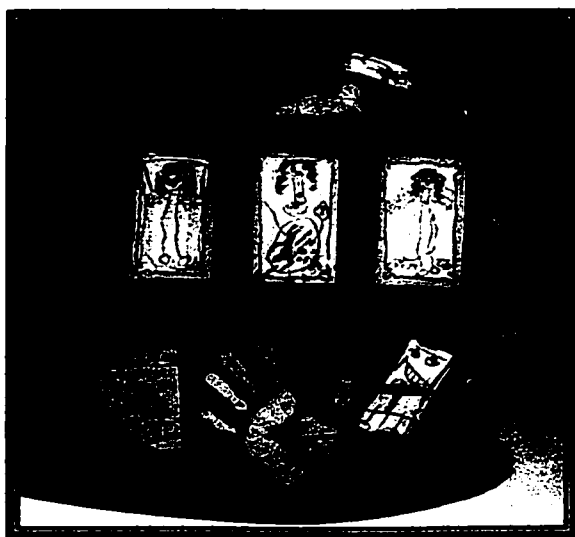


Figure XVI: Don Reitz, *The Journey*, 24"

are a staple of American Ceramics History. His work has appeared yearly in *Ceramics Monthly*, *Ceramic Review*, *Studio Potter*, etc. since 1976 and is in the collections of countless national and international collections. A retired professor of art (ceramics) who taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison,

Don Reitz continues to conduct

⁶⁸A salt kiln is one in which coarse salt is introduced into the kiln at about 1200 degrees C, or when the maturing temperature of the clay has been reached. The salt vaporizes and combines with the silica in the clay to form a thin glassy glaze on the ware. In wood firing, the kiln is fired with wood. The ash from the burnt wood settles on the ware and melts to create a distinctive, usually mottled brown, glaze.

⁶⁹Liquid clay that can be colored with stains or oxides and used to decorate the surface of ware prior to firing.

⁷⁰An inorganic coloring material used to color slips and glazes.

⁷¹A type of slip applied to bisqueware (once-fired ceramics) for the purpose of decoration.

⁷²An iridescent glaze surface obtained by introducing tin oxide to a cooling kiln (about 700 degrees C).

workshops across the United States, insisting on driving his pick-up whenever possible. He recently collaborated on a large wall mural for the Nippon Castle Research Center in Himeji City, Japan with Yukio, Jim Leedy, and Don Bendel.

Meeting Don Reitz, when I asked him if he would participate in my study, was meeting my childhood hero. Just before that, I had attended an opening reception for an exhibition of Reitz's former students at the University of Wisconsin. I think what struck me most forcefully was the vast variety of work shown. I did not see even one mini-Reitz piece, which is what I had expected of students of a legendary hero-teacher.

Later that week, I nervously approached Don Reitz concerning participation in this study. Primarily on the strength of word of mouth and a *Ceramic Monthly* (February 1991) article that referred to his difficulties in elementary school, I asked him if he was dyslexic. I was again amazed by the warmth and genuineness of his response. Despite an extremely busy schedule, he made time to speak with me twice on the telephone and invited me to come see his studio in Clarkdale, AZ. Not by design, but perhaps significantly, the two Reitz interviews were both the first and the last interviews I collected. Because both our schedules were tight, almost four months passed between interviews.

May 12th, 2000:

CA: Could you tell me a little about your early life and dyslexia? How old were you when you noticed something different?

DR: Well, to be honest with you, I never noticed anything different. You know, it's just that I learned to deal with things in such a way that.... They

didn't know anything about dyslexia, they just thought you were a slow learner. ...I probably was an adult before I started thinking about it. I just compensated for words. Obviously I'm visually oriented—and that really helped me a great deal. Going through school, it was difficult, but I'd rather be running a trap line or fishing than being in school anyhow. So I didn't pay a hell of a lot of attention to it all anyhow, I guess.

However when it came time to take tests, I would get that pencil in my hand and just freeze up. I'd just put it down on the paper and walk out of the room. ...Probably in 3rd grade or 4th grade..., Miss Shouk would ...say, "*Now Donald, come on back in the room now, sit down.*" And she would ask me the questions verbally, which in retrospect was a remarkable thing to do. And I'd get a 100 on the test. And so Miss Rosencrantz and Miss Shouk, they knew how to deal with me, I suppose, and they would always give me chores which were more physical chores—clapping the erasers....

But I was very good at certain subjects.... I was very good at biology, the natural world, I could understand that very clearly. And because it was so difficult to read, I just didn't read things. I would listen to stories, you know, and I would pretend a great deal. I was a great pretender. ...If I saw a John Wayne movie, I was John Wayne for that moment and *The Wake of the Red Witch*. You know, Johnny White was the only Tarzan, the only *real* Tarzan....

And I would hunt and fish and trap. I had a three-mile trap line one time. Oh, I expect I must have been about 11 years... at the time. I would go at 4 o'clock in the morning, before school, to my traps, come back, clean myself up and go to school....

I would go a lot by visual equivalent and I would look at words-- like, 'men' was smaller than 'women' so I went to the men's room. Of course if the word was 'gentlemen', I could get fouled up, and still do to this day.... But I guess I was very drawn to the physical world because I can deal with that, one on one, a visual thing, putting things together, constructing things. I wasn't that great in the analytical world. I might say, though, in mathematics, if they would give me the problems, I could really figure them out. The abstract world was—I know that if I had a physical problem in front of me, I would solve it; there'd be no problem. But it seems to me that I could calculate it in my head...[easily] in terms of mathematics. I couldn't do it on the paper. But if I related it to six birds and seven gorillas, I could deal with it.... And so, I was always transposing things. Therefore, it took me longer to do any exams and I never finished the exams 'cause the time would always run out....

High school sports were good. I was always good at sports, although I always worked. In those times it was even bigger to work than to play sports. It was a good thing to do. If I wanted money (we didn't have a lot of money), if I wanted money, I would have to figure out how to earn money. So I would do several things. After it rained and the farmers

plowed (in the Delaware Valley), I would go and pick up arrowheads because they'd be sticking up like little jewels. And I'd sell them to Doc Cumins for a nickel a piece. One time he gave me a dollar for a tomahawk and I thought that was *far out!* Or I would mow lawns, shovel snow, take care of gardens.... I was always gardening. I was always good in the dirt.

Of course, I attribute that to one of my mentors, my father. And we always had gardens. It was always our job to maintain them because we canned for the wintertime. Mom had a big root cellar; I mean the root cellar was always full of cans and goods. We made sauerkraut and husked corn and chucked corn and chou-chou and scalded tomatoes, by the hundreds of thousands it seemed. But the garden was a good place for me to be. And in the dirt, and obviously I'm still in the dirt. So that my hands were a tool—I was very successful.

I got three A's in school: gym, shop and art. The rest of them, I got by... for several reasons. In later years when World War II was on, I was in the meat market and I had all the ration stamps, and all the butter, and all the sugar, and all the meat. If they wanted anything, they'd better not fail me...(laughter). I mean, *I was terrible*, see? But I was very--let me think about that-- I loved to cut meat. I cut meat ever since I could look over the top of a meat block. ...The store was a good thing. I liked to deal with people.

I like to *verbally* deal with people. I don't write papers. I don't write for grants because I just don't like to write. I'm trying to write letters right now because a friend of mine died and I'm trying to write a letter. And I'm having trouble writing. I just don't.... I have a tremendous telephone bill (laughter)....

I love the natural world. I love to see things around me. I travel a great deal and much of it is in my truck; I love to drive. That's another physical thing. Rather than planning out a trip, I'll just go and plan as I go, depending on the excitement of the potential of things happening as I go....

CA: You talked a little about learning through metaphor, that if you could translate things into something physical, mathematics, you could understand it. Do you have any more to add to that?

DR: We were one time multiplying miles and distances and I translated it to my house and the distance to the river where my trap line was and I could figure that out. I don't know how to explain that. I can see the problem, the equation, but I couldn't put it down on paper. And I would work it out in my head. To this day, when I'm building kilns, I figure it out in bricks. I know how many bricks will go so far. I don't—it's really strange, I haven't talked like this before—I don't use any mechanical devices. Oh, I use the wheel, of course-- I mean, in figuring things, I don't use gauges. I

don't have any gauges on my kilns. I don't have any-- I just know what's happening, by sound, by listening, by smelling and using those senses. I don't know how much this has to do with dyslexia to be honest with you.

CA: Well, sensing, calculating, using different ways to do it, but still doing it....

DR: ...Well, we (dyslexics) do very well when we have something in front of us, that has to do with our hands...

CA: Can you tell me about this early teacher. It seems like it was very sensitive of her, intelligent of her, to figure out how you could do what she wanted you to do.

DR: Yes, Miss Rosencratz was very good to me. Of course I didn't realize that at the time. We never really know who are good teachers until later. There would be a problem and she would equate it to something that I knew in my world, like my garden or trap line. I don't know if that's anything to do with dyslexia, but it's being a hell of a good teacher. She dealt with me that way because she knew I could translate it in those terms, and I just could not put it down on paper. I know at home-- obviously I just can't spell to save my soul-- and Mom would keep saying, *"You know that! Can't you see that? You know you can spell that!"* Of course I was turning things backwards. To this day, I may dial Alaska on

the telephone. (Laughter) Numbers seem to be the most difficult thing I have to deal with. I keep turning them around and misplacing them in the wrong sequence. Numbers seem to be the most challenging thing at this point.

CA: What do you do about glaze formulas?

DR: Oddly enough, I go by materials. I know what the materials can do. I'm a kitchen method kind of glazer. I know what will melt and this will stick on the pot and these will produce color... Here's another example of teaching: Val Cushing⁷³ at Alfred: I was an undergraduate. We were the same age; maybe Val is a year younger, but he was my teacher. We had to do glaze calculation, an exam. It was a four or five hour exam! ...I could not understand the molecular formula situation⁷⁴. And Val said, "*Look, Don, here you go: see this column? This does not melt. See this column, all these things will cause it to melt. And see this column, that's what will keep the damn thing from running off the pot.*"⁷⁵

⁷³This is the same Val Cushing already encountered in John Gill's interview, who taught glaze calculation.

⁷⁴The chemical make-up of a material (for example, silica is SiO₂).

⁷⁵This is a good example of good teaching for someone who is having difficulty with the symbols, who if statistics bear out Val Cushing regularly encountered during his very long teaching career. Really for many ceramists, it is sufficient to know how materials will react under different conditions. This is why ceramics is friendly to a variety of learners. For those who like the chemistry and mathematics, they can and do flourish (Marilyn Lavine and Ron Roy were both university chemistry professors, but are now internationally renowned ceramic artists), but so can those who find this difficult.

"Oh, of course. That makes sense!" And it may just be that I didn't have a chemical background—but I knew what each material would do. And I would do test upon test on materials. Val had given us some limits for formulas, within these limits, most anything will work—but mainly I would know by feel of materials, by smell—it's my other senses.⁷⁶

...I think its mainly why I've been instrumental in reviving the salt glazing tradition and adding new colors and potentials to the salt glazing potential... Salt seems to be a very simple way to get the colors and surfaces I like. ... I don't use very many glazes really. Salt is very physical. You load the kiln and you get temperature. Throw rock salt in the firebox and it explodes and bangs. You get steam and smoke and noise! It was great! That's why I like wood firing. It's a participation. I can read a kiln by my senses.⁷⁷ **I don't read the gauges; it fouls me up when they start firing by pyrometer. ...I say, *"Just tell me where you want the kiln to be by tomorrow morning and I'll get it there."* I know combustion and I know what makes things burn and what distributes heat. I don't need the gauges and pyrometers and things.**

⁷⁶Don Reitz is speaking both literally and figuratively at the same time. I was taught by a student of Val Cushing's who taught us to recognize materials by their feel, taste and texture. At the same time, he is describing a knowing by experience of what the materials will do, separately and in combinations, and when heated to various temperatures for different lengths of time.

⁷⁷Many ceramists, and I was trained in this tradition, were taught to 'read' a kiln by the color of the light that came out of it, presence of smoke, the smell of dampness, burning organic materials, reduction or unburned fuel, and by the color and length of the flames. Now pyrometers and oxyprobes are very common, and very useful, especially when used in conjunction with the thorough sensory understanding of what is going on during a firing.

CA: Could you tell me a little bit about any current characteristics you attribute to being dyslexic? Either positive or negative.

DR: I think the biggest thing is my lack of reading. My reading skills are pretty poor. So I listen to books on tape, which is very positive. You know, when you're traveling you can rent a book on tape and just leave it off at the next truck stop. And so I listen to a lot of books on tape. Reading, spelling, letter writing—that's my biggest... (Laughter) I'm not, well, I'm not... (laughter), I organize things in my own way. An apprentice cleaned up my studio and I didn't know where anything was at all! Right now, it looks like it's in a mess, but it's not really a mess. It's the way I know how to deal with things. This pile represents something. But I guess to put things in files or in order-- is not my-- I can't really do that. I think I really have my own order to things, but that has to do with priorities, not just dyslexia.

CA: I get very anxious if people move my piles around. Could you tell me a little about your communication with people since letter writing is laborious. You talk on the phone, you do workshops, obviously...

DR: I have always been very good it seems... at talking with people. I think that's a skill I developed in the meat market, communicating with customers. I've always liked people. And the *verbal* communicative skills

are fine. I can go to an interview and I have no problem at all. But I can't plan it out. I told my son: *"I'm going to do a lecture at Princeton."* And he said: *"Princeton! That's a big school. What are you going to talk about?"* I said: *"I don't know. I'm not there yet. I'll wait and see what they need."* ...I can't pre-plan a workshop. I just have to go and do it off the top of my head and however it goes, it goes.

CA: You respond to the situation directly.

DR: When we just built this kiln; my friend had all these blueprints and all the bricks were counted and I just said: *"I think that stack ought to be three feet higher. I just know it. It has to be higher. I don't know what the engineers think, but that's what it's got to be."*

If I have to write a letter, I write a postcard. Quick little notes. And I find myself scribbling the words. They aren't spelt right. They can't read it, but they can see it's the visual equivalent.

CA: The shape's about right so people can understand what you mean?

DR: Right. I tend to do that while I'm writing.

CA: What are the subjects of the books on tape?

DR: Two main kinds. I just finished *Texas* by Michener. I just love those kinds of stories that have that historical content. I think, *"God, that's just how it might have happened."* And I like make-believe: *The Little*

CA: You mentioned your parents. Your father was interested in gardens and your Mom became impatient about spelling.

DR: ...She was impatient about the book learning because she knew I was smart. I mean, everything else that I did-- I did many other things well. But what mother now would let her son go up to the Delaware River at four in the morning to run a trap line. She taught me to cook. I'm a *good* cook. She helped me with the physical things. She helped me; she allowed me the privilege of being who I am. She was a pretty strong German. She could discipline you without too much problem, of course. But she helped me—her basement was full of my skinning boards and my traps were all over the place. She would get me ready, call me to get up for fishing during trout season, and as long as I would bring home horse radish—that was ok with her. She always had other plans for it. She was appreciative that I was a college professor, but she never really told anyone what I did. As a meat cutter, she was very proud of me. She was always very proud of me, but art was something you did on weekends. It's not a real job, for crying out loud. So she was good at allowing me the privilege of having...beauty in my world. I mean, I had snakes and things all over the place. Looking back, she was a pretty damn good lady.

Dad was more of the earth, a very gentle man, an accountant....A very honest man; he taught me about integrity.... Dad, I saw him work for hours doing someone's income tax and only charge them four or five

dollars because they didn't have much money. And his planting of the garden in rows and how he healed things. Come wintertime, he pulled the cabbage out and turned them upside down in the rows, and put leaves over them so in the wintertime we could pull out cabbages. And just his way of working with dirt.

And now when I'm working, my hands turn into my father's hands just for a second. And when I'm cooking and I'm snapping beans, my hands turn into Mom's....

CA: September 7th and this is our second interview. ... In the first interview last May, you said at one point that you'd discovered later about your dyslexia, could we touch on that?

DR: I guess it was probably when I went, quite a bit later actually, probably when I went to college. In the service and so forth, I'd never dealt with that term, but then when I went to Kutztown (a teacher's college), a fellow student (we had a trailer together) would be reading all the time, just read all the time. I said: "*Gene, how do you do that?*" His eyes would go down the middle of the page and read, you know, like really fast! He tried to show me and then we started talking about it and he said: "*You know you're really dyslexic!*" And I said: "*What's that?*" And so he then explained to me about this dyslexia thing. We went through all the things like turning words backwards and ...why my handwriting looked like

crap, ...and why I can't really spell.... That was where I really first started thinking about this dyslexia thing. It never occurred to me before that.

...It never occurred to me, I just dealt with life the way it was. I ... started working and, never, nobody-- of course nobody ever said much about dyslexia, I guess. ...I was in fields of work that were physical, you know? ...The people I was associated with-- they really didn't know much about dyslexia. ...It ...never come up in a conversation. ...But when I started to get into the educational system, people who were-- dealt more with the other side of their brain or something-- then it obviously came up.

And so before... tests..., my friend Gene would say: "*Okay I'll help with these tests.*" So we would talk about it, about what we're studying. Let's say History was a hard one for me, ...he would record [our conversation about the material that was going to be on the test].... Then, he'd play the recording back, you know, and he would...[repeat] the answers we'd come up with. And that's how I went through my damn History test. I just couldn't-- it was very difficult to go down the list, and read, and make sense.... I could make sense of it, but it took so darn long for me to read what I was reading that I would just give up. I'd just throw the book across the room, you know?

CA: What about art?

DR: Well in art I was very good in art.... I had no trouble putting down imagery.... Let's see: ...my faces always faced to left; I don't know if that

means anything, but I noticed that, but I never had any problems. Of course, when we started, you know, in art I was an abstract expressionist for a time. If you're slap-dabbing paint and throwing it on the canvas.... I never had any trouble with color at all. Color was never a problem of mine. And I wasn't working at any kind of hard edge, obviously my art has never taken a hard edge bent.... It was always very free and very loose-- a kind of controlled freedom. So [in art] I didn't have to deal with the parameters of my dyslexia....

In clay, of course, ...it was just a natural thing to do. My hand and eye coordination... were excellent and I could really express myself with the material. It responded to my emotions and not to my-- I don't know what you would call it-- intellect or something?I work spontaneously and clay is a very great recorder of spontaneous action. It's recording your thoughts and you're-- you know where you are that day-- and so I never really ever had any trouble.

I'm trying to think, except when I would do show cards-- I did lettering for a department store and I would get letters backwards when I'd be lettering a show card: B's and D's ...I would get them backwards, J's and Gs and I'd have to do the sign over again, you know? Those types of things. ...We had a [graphics] course.... It had to do with calligraphy, using the flat pen to get different types of letters, and it was something I could really concentrate on. ...I wasn't spelling anything, I was just doing the shape that happened to be a letter, and so there was no problem with that.

...You know, looking back through my whole life, all the things I've done... have been physical, basically. It was a natural thing... [for me] because I could respond. I've always had great physical dexterity and physical strength and coordination.... I was good in sports, the little I could play 'cause I usually had to work; so I couldn't play a lot of sports. I don't know if this has anything to do with it, but when I bat a baseball, ..I bat cross-handed. My hands are in a position opposite to what they should be. Everyone says: "*You're gonna break your wrists if you do that.*" It's the only way I could bat, I don't know if that has anything to do with dyslexia or not.

But the long and the short of it is that it was a natural thing for me to do to come to art because it's a very free, expressive ...subject.

CA: Do you draw?

DR: Yeah, I draw quite a bit.

CA: Do you draw as a preliminary to sculptures?

DR: No, not really. When I'm-- a lot of the sculptures will be just with a wet brush on the shop floor. I think in terms of motion, movement, position, that kind of thing, and then it's in my mind and I just do it. It seems if I sketch something out, I've already done it and it doesn't make that much sense to me to do it again. I do sketch, but the sketches are...on scratch paper while I'm sitting at the table or something, just quick

little things like that. But ...my paintings were much more ...abstract-expressionist. They were not literal interpretations of things. Although now I am doing-- it's interesting-- now I'm doing a lot of prints....I rent a studio... down in Phoenix for a day or two days, and with that I get an assistant [to help with all the] technical stuff 'cause ...I just want to draw. I just, I do monoprints and I do etchings. I don't think I would be good at doing like drypoint or something, or litho where you had to-- things that are... [not as] spontaneous. The monoprints are on plastic. It's a one-shot deal and I really like that. But I do draw quite a bit; I don't pre-sketch those either.

I find sometimes the best art for me is no-thinking art. What comes out, comes out. ...I have no fear that something will not be there. I don't have a fear that there'll be no image, or there'll be no idea.... I just do it and if it comes out successful then I save it, and if not then I throw it away....

CA: Along the same lines, I was curious about the aesthetic process that you go through when you're thinking. Your thinking process in making art. Are you aware of the processes you go through?

DR: ... I react and my art is basically in reaction to things, or about

things. I can hear a song and I'll start painting or start drawing or something will come to me. ...I don't think ...[consciously about] the elements and principles of design. ... Whatever comes out, well it comes out. I know that I'm trying to get an emotion. Mainly my art is about—*(sorry, Connie, I'm beating around the bush; I haven't thought about it a hell of a lot)* —mainly my work is about emotions, physical emotions, ... trying to get power in them. I'm trying to push down on that piece and up on this piece ..., and the texture is in opposition to the top part of the pulled portion. ... A vertical, which is opposed to the horizontal, and I think about proportions.

Proportion pleases me: how the foot turns in or turns out, and those kinds of things. I don't think in terms of— ... the "Sarah" images were about...

[identity] and the healing process⁷⁹.

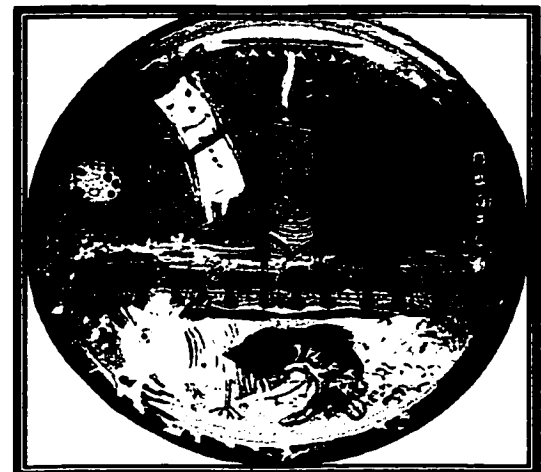


Figure XVIII: Don Reitz, *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright, Take a Ride with a Catfish Tonight, 24"*

...That was probably the most thought-provoking time period of my whole damn life, and those images were about Sarah and myself, and what we are going to do..., that search for my five year-old, for that freedom of being five again. Again, it turned into a subject matter about the planet, about the earth, the environment, about finding yourself, finding

⁷⁹The 'Sarah' series was initiated by a drawing/get well card sent to Don Reitz, after his life-threatening automobile accident, by his very young niece, who was, herself, coping with cancer. Don Reitz described it as a conversation between the two about recovery, pain and reinventing themselves.

your whatever it is you're-- the person ...you find ...the strength to become, your persona, you might say.

Color never-- ...I didn't really think about colors, I just reached for a brush.... Actually I've had poets and people look at my drawings and my low fire imagery, and say: "*You sure use a good sense of colors to express this or that.*" And I never even thought about it, you know? I just naturally did it. I didn't say: "*Well, this is really a down period. I'm gonna use gray here. Or I'm gonna put chartreuse for jealousy.*" I never really think about that, it just comes out that way. There must be some kind of natural relationship between these emotions and colors that I've never really thought about, actually. If I think too much about things too hard-- I can't get analytical about things-- it bothers me. If I have to write down why I'm doing something, it's very difficult for me to do it. I usually end up not doing it....

... I guess I'm thinking while I'm working, and that's why I like the wheel so much...over the years. ...The wheel was a great spontaneous way to think. You're just thinking as it's moving, as... [the piece] is growing, you're making decisions. I enjoy making decisions in the moment. ...The wheel, as it turns, you pull, you push, you turn in, turn out, up, you know what I mean? The decision-making was an instant thing and it relied on your intuition.

... What's intuitive? Your past learning? Whatever it is, whatever makes my proportions my proportions, I guess that's what I'm trying to find

out. When it pleases me, then obviously that's what I do. I think it all comes down to: "Does it please you or not?" My art is *not* a disturbing art, actually. It's meant to make you think, it's not an attack on anything. It's not political by nature....

CA: So you're responding to previous decisions and you're also-- it sounds like you're talking about what mastery is-- that these things are so much a part of you, the various decisions, that you don't think about them consciously?

DR: Right, right! I mean, a flower can express anger for me. In my drawings symbolism is important. I don't think about it; I just do it. Then I think about why I did it later. ...It seemed like this flower's the right thing [to render], 'cause they seem to be happy, so I put them in. Then there's ... one flower which is broken, but still blooming.... There was always, in front of every drawing I ever did, the sun was out. I noticed after a while, I always had a sun in there some place. ... I never made sketches, then worked from the sketches.

In Indianapolis next week, there's this whole drawing thing-- clay, painting and drawing in Indianapolis, and just to work in front of 60-70 people.... Drawing in public is a little difficult for me. It's not hard for me to throw. It's easy for me to do that, but to draw imagery-- it's difficult. I can do it if I can really lock into myself and forget about everybody.

CA: The 'Sarah' series, when you spoke of the healing process, you're talking about physical healing?

DR: Both physical and mental healing; they went together. Yes, with my truck accident⁸⁰. Obviously the clay became more of a mental healing between Sarah and me, because she's trying to recover from Leukemia. I'm trying to walk again, so the imagery and so forth was the healing. The healing is more about saying: "*Hey, I'm a good person.*" And I learned a lot of things. I started to believe a lot more in faith, that your physical condition's voluntary. If you want to be sick, you can be sick. If you want to be happy, you can be happy.... It's your decision. So I felt that I gained a whole lot of faith again in myself, that I'm okay. A piece might've failed, but *I'm* okay, *I* didn't fail.... And then ...the communication between Sarah and me, saying: "***We're okay; we'll get better!***"

You see, we're gonna put all the things that we fear ...on paper here; we're gonna look at it. We're gonna put them on the wall and we're gonna cross them off one at a time, just get them out of there. We got a lot of problems, but it's like a dresser drawer. If you pull all the drawers out, the dresser will fall over. But if you take one out at a time, you take care of that drawer, and then push it back and it won't fall on you. That's

⁸⁰ In 1983, "...Don Reitz took a turnoff on the Cincinnati freeway in the rain and smashed his pickup truck into a light pole. Pinned in the wreckage, ...he knew his left leg and pelvis were in bad shape. ...His hip and left leg were each broken in three places. His shoulder was also broken, and a bone protruded from his left arm at the elbow. The main thing was to keep from going into shock. It would be the better part of an hour before help would arrive.... (Dahlquist, D. (1984) Don Reitz: new directions. *Ceramics Monthly*, October, p. 34.)

what my life was like.... So we would solve these mental things between ourselves and found out that Sarah and I had many of the same mental problems with the healing, having faith, and again that everything's gonna be okay. Now, we had good doctors, too....

...I wish I had some great discovery that I'd made to tell you about.... I think I made little bitty, tiny, little discoveries as I went along....

If you start making your mind feel okay and accepting who you are, accepting the way you work and the fact that I--there's some writing on my pieces, things like, "... walking on the edge...", thinking serious stuff... and I would put letters backwards, but I didn't give a damn. ...I misspelled words, there should be "i" not "e", so I'd scratch the "e" out and put an "i" over the top of it. But it didn't matter to me-- that's who I am! So that way, that gives you faith in yourself, you know? That's a great healing experience....

CA: Do you think this courage you're talking about, to be who you are and to accept who you are, do you think that has anything to do with what happened with the dyslexia, or coping with it?

DR: Well, I'm sure that dyslexia always gave me an insecure feeling about so many things because I would be the last in class, you know? I would be the last one to get through any kind of readings or ...tests. A test would come and I would just walk out of the damn test. So I always had

this inferior feeling. ...In my later life, I had this fear.... I don't know if that's the right word, but it's a very, very uncomfortable thing being in intellectual circles, you know what I mean? Like the professorial clubs and things and people would invite me to their houses and they were all very well-read people and... I'm-- I was very uncomfortable.

After I began accepting myself, for myself, and saying: *"Now look, ...we're just here for a visit and why am I worrying about this stuff. This is who the hell I am. If you can handle me, fine! If you can't, that's okay too."* So I still feel kind of uncomfortable because if they start..., I haven't read that much in my life. ...Most of my learning comes from the physical world, and now I listen a great deal. I listen a great deal to books on tape and I'm learning through that..... So the insecurity came from way back there when I was a kid, ...way back and ...it's maybe why I went to the physical world. ... I was good at that. I was a great. I was the number one ...deep sea diver. I mean, top in the field. I was very good in the lumber cutting, a good meat-cutter. I was a number one meat-cutter.

But then when it came to the written things, it was just a son of a bitch for me to try and pass the written exams in university. ...I got through it, but not without a lot of problems. And I think they let me through because I was so damn good with my artwork, and how I could fire any kiln there was. I could make clay in any way.... So I think they gave me a lot of latitude in other areas, ...English and so forth, communications... and things of that nature.

CA: If you were presented right now with a whole class full of, I don't know, 8 year-olds who were dyslexic, what would you tell them? What do you know now that you wished someone could have told you then?

DR: I'd let them know they're okay....and not to feel afraid.... I expect I would relate the way my life went to them. I *am* a successful person. It's important to find out what you like and then polish it. But knowing that you're okay inside, you're not damaged.... Everyone's different from everyone else....

Summary:

Don Reitz was born in the rural mid-western United States in 1927. During the Great Depression, the work that he did as a small child-- hunting, fishing, working in the family garden, canning fruits and vegetables, mowing lawns and other odd jobs-- contributed significantly to the family's survival. Although school work was frustrating, especially test-taking, it was also clear that he was not lazy and that the work he did well was extremely valuable.

Don Reitz was also lucky enough to have skillful and sensitive teachers who knew him well enough to be able to find ways that he could be successful in school tasks. Mathematical problems were presented in terms that were meaningful to his experience in the garden or his trap lines, and sometimes tests were sometimes presented orally. His early teachers seemed determined to find ways that he could be successful. Perhaps because of this, Don Reitz says that he did not feel particularly different. He assumed that he was a slow learner, but

did not care too much since he loved, and was good at, so many other very important things. Both his teachers and his family accepted him as he was. His mother allowed him his trap lines and skinning boards: "She allowed me the privilege of being who I am."

Later teachers also made significant effort to discover how he could be successful. A fellow student in teacher's college recognized the characteristic signs of dyslexia and helped him study for tests by rehearsing the texts with him using a tape recorder. Before this, he had never really thought of why he could not read or write well. "I just dealt with life the way it was." When his work was primarily as a physical laborer, no one thought about his reading problems. Yet when he returned to school, this became very important. Similarly, another very important teacher taught him ceramic chemistry by organizing lists of materials according to their relevant properties. Many, many glaze and materials tests reinforced his knowledge and understanding of the ceramic materials, until this learning was so much a part of him that he did not have to think about it consciously. "I know what the materials can do."

Reitz says that he is a visual-learner, that he learns best from direct physical involvement in the real world and from listening to stories. Therefore these teaching methods that utilized both of these properties were successful with him. Don Reitz does not use gauges or other measuring devices for reading his kilns or for building kilns. Using his senses to judge when conditions are correct, Reitz said: "I know what's happening ...by listening, by smelling...." Gauges may be less useful because of his tendency to transpose numbers.

Don Reitz's mastery, represents a deep learning from experience. It is so ingrained that time after time, and in different contexts, Don Reitz repeated the importance of spontaneity. He likes "no think" art. This means that the art is about a manifestation of the power of emotion and oppositions: "I react and my art is basically in reaction to things." Writing or pre-drawing pieces drains the vitality from the artwork. He senses the right proportions for both sculptures and kilns, measuring things imaginatively in brick-lengths. He likes the wheel because he can make decisions as he goes. He uses color intuitively. He responds to the moment, waits to find out what is needed at a workshop before he decides what to do. "I think in terms of motion, movement, position..., and then it's in my mind and I just do it."

Ceramics is important for Don Reitz because he can express himself spontaneously with the materials. "Clay is a great recorder of spontaneous action." His physical dexterity, strength and coordination are very important, but not as important as the expressive properties inherent in clay. Despite his many positive learning experiences, Don Reitz says that he always had an inferior feeling about himself, a fear of not being good enough or smart enough to talk with intellectuals. His *Sarah* series is about identity and the healing process in which he searches for his own whole and confident five-year-old self who could lead both him and his ailing niece back to health. Don Reitz believes that his physical condition is voluntary and has much to do with accepting himself for who he is. His five-year-old self would teach him that he was okay, that he didn't fail and will get better. This work is about gaining the courage to accept himself as

he is, backwards letters and all. It is about giving himself faith in his own resources. His advice to children is not to be afraid.

Review of common elements in the interviews:

These reported experiences of the seven artists interviewed above offer unique perspectives on a variety of subjects. There are an enormous number of similarities beyond their occupation and gender (please see the chart that follows). All of these artists are from generations in which dyslexia was not widely known, even among teachers. Their experiences in elementary and secondary school are remarkably close. Imaginative play and make believe was discussed by all of the artists. All, but Randy Schmidt, of the artists grew up in rural or suburban areas, and all of the artists spent considerable time playing or working outside: building things, fishing, hunting, gardening, taking care of animals, digging tunnels or making forts. Comic books, family story-telling and acting out stories with siblings or friends were other activities reported. Les Manning loved to sew and make clothes, initially out of paper, and John Gill adored gardening and singing. Three of the artists specifically discussed their enjoyment and skill in preparing food. These activities outside of school offered very important opportunities for a positive self-image, and perhaps an essential model of successful learning.

All of the artists had at least one very determined parent or close relative who worked very hard to help them. All also had at least one exceptionally sensitive family member or teacher who refocused attention on the child's strengths or invented ways that he could be successful with difficult material. As

children, the artists had been acutely aware of who was working hard to help them. As adults, they were remarkably forgiving of those who either did not, or would not, help them as children.

At one time or another, all (except Don Reitz) were singled out in school as stupid or lazy. All regularly suffered humiliations both petty and significant, such as being seated in the back of the classroom because of poor grades or being “left out” (as Greg Wentz referred to failing a grade). All mentioned painful instances with both peers and teachers. While some of the negative attention was by design, as a result of a policy or teacher’s considered beliefs (however faulty), more than once the dyslexic child disturbed a teacher’s fragile equilibrium. In fact, three of the seven specifically discussed a teacher’s nervous breakdown. Many of the artists suffered disproportionate consequences for their poor academic performance. They attribute qualities such as shyness, insecurity and self-doubt to these deeply hurtful experiences. Despite this, many of the artists were determined to find a silver lining even in very painful experiences and most expressed great satisfaction with their current lives⁸¹.

Only one of the artists, John Gill, got into serious trouble in school because of his behavior. As a result, he was sent away from home to a school for ‘troubled’ boys. At this school, he was routinely beaten for misspelling words. Another artist, Randy Schmidt, told me that he had often been disruptive in more minor ways. He relayed, however, a story with a dramatically different outcome.

⁸¹Double-checking biographical information on Alan Bennett, I fished for the usual Vita information about exhibitions and publications, which he did not have readily handy. I wanted to support my point about his success. Picking up on “success”, he said: “Tell ‘em I’m happy.”

During an incident, a substitute teacher asked him what he was doing. He told her that he was watering the plants, which of course was not the truth. However, this teacher simply said, "Thank you. That is very thoughtful of you." This small act of belief had a profound effect on the child. Acting as though the child intended to be helpful caused him to change his behavior. These two stories were exceptions in the interviews. Most of the artists were reasonably cooperative, if not academically successful. Having the opportunity to start fresh by changing schools was often discussed as a positive move by five of the seven.

All of the artists, except Don Reitz, expressed an early (at age 6 or 7) identity as different from their peers and came to a crisis in school at age 8 or 9. The beginning of adolescence was actually a more positive time for the artists, and there were improvements in school around the age of 13. Although the artists noticed that they could not do some of the things their peers found easy, they also recognized that they could easily do things their peers found difficult. They were divergent thinkers and they had developed unusual solutions to problems in order to cope with their reading difficulties. These coping mechanisms (listening carefully, finding unusual connections between ideas and using their powerful imaginations) were more appreciated as they got older.

Single word decoding remains problematic, as well as number and letter reversals, and left-right confusion. As children, all had difficulty telling time and this was often their first memory of academic failure. However, all of these artists

adore story-telling and did well in subjects in which the material was presented as a story that could be told orally, as in history and English literature. All of them have a fierce admiration for well-written texts. Reading is still frustratingly slow and, because of this, the artists prefer to read short segments rather than very long texts. They like poetry, history, mythology or religion and short stories. Three artists utilize books on tape to satisfy their needs for information and literary satisfaction.

All expressed comprehension of material presented orally and thrive on conversation and discussions. In addition, all of the artists reported that they had had *passionate* interests and fascinations in a wide range of subjects, especially those with practical applications. Even in mathematics in which difficulty with number reversals caused considerable frustration, all of these artists were able to succeed when given practical applications of theory. Geometry and biology were enjoyed, but algebra was a struggle. Indeed any subject presented with a strong emphasis on symbols without a picture, story or materials to manipulate was problematic. Rote memory was always difficult, that is decontextualized learning, learning without a story attached. Therefore multiplication tables were difficult to remember, but baseball statistics were attached to an intrinsic interest, a meaningful story, and therefore not a problem. However, a few of the artists claim an intuitive ability to solve math or engineering problems correctly, but have difficulty explaining how they arrive at the answer except to say that they get “a picture in their minds.”

None of the artists currently enjoy glaze calculation, but six of them report that they are able to work with empirical formulas if necessary. All of them profess greater satisfaction in creating clays and glazes by using the “cooking” method, which utilizes a deep understanding of the qualities of the materials and how they interact. This term, or the related “kitchen method” employed by Don Reitz, was used by all artists without suggestion from me. Many of the artists fire kilns without much reliance on gauges, but prefer to rely on their own senses instead. All except Don Reitz emphasize the necessity to double-check in areas of weakness.

College and university, for the six who attended, were more successful than elementary or secondary school. These six artists discovered ceramics only in college. Michael Sherrill, who is largely self-taught, discovered ceramics late in high school. In fact, six of the seven artists had used terms usually connected with religious conversion (like “epiphany”, p.) or romantic love (an “instant marriage”, p.) to describe their immediate recognition of the right fit between themselves and ceramics. Les Manning refers to his intense “love affair”, p. with clay, that he was seduced by the discipline. Similarly, John Gill repeatedly recommended “dating” a field, not marrying it p. . He said this to contrast various shallower interests with his deep love of art.

Even Gardner (1993b) in *Creating Minds* uses romantic metaphors to describe the phenomena of the “crystallizing moment” experienced by creative people, usually in young adulthood. He describes the experience as an instance, “even a moment when these young individuals first fell in love with a specific

material, situation or person—one that continues to hold attraction for them” (p. 32). This “attraction” is a committed one, not a flirtation, and the creative individuals knew the difference because s/he had sampled other fields. Gardner’s (1993b) “CP” (p. 361), or Creative Person, flirts with several fields and domains before her crystallizing moment. Similarly, Don Reitz was alternately a butcher, an army Supplies Officer, a deep-sea diver, lumberjack and a truck driver. John Gill was going to be a bronze sculptor; Les Manning and Alan Bennett intended to be painters; Randy Schmidt and Greg Wentz were business majors.

Although it may have seemed like a bolt out of the blue, there were always subtle preparations for this “epiphany with clay” (Michael Sherrill, p.). Most of the artists described prior changes in their attitudes indicating a will to succeed before finding ceramics. As children, many of the artists had been aware that part of their problems came from others’ low expectations. When they, then, had an opportunity to ‘reinvent’ themselves, they took up this challenge with very positive results. A change of school (Alan Bennet, Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Les Manning), a substitute teacher (Randy Schmidt), or a weight loss (Michael Sherrill) provided them with opportunities to create for themselves new personas. In college, they intended to find a way to succeed, and did.

Not only did the artists love ceramics, they felt like ceramics loved them too. All of the artists expressed the thought that they were not handicapped in ceramics, and that clay allowed them to be free, unhampered, and to work in ways that felt natural to them. They were able to be themselves, and that being

themselves was a strength instead of a weakness. Furthermore, the field of ceramics is so huge that they could never learn everything about it, and could not become bored. Many described situations of faking it or bluffing in school, but that they could not, nor did they need to, in the ceramics studio.

Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt and Greg Wentz specifically mention that they think that being dyslexic contributed to their artistic success in several ways. They learned early the nature of their weaknesses. This made them determined to find and develop their strengths, as well as circumvent their weaknesses. They were absolutely convinced of the necessity of hard work and sustained effort in order to succeed. Two (Alan Bennett and John Gill) acknowledged the importance of complementary strengths and weaknesses with their wives.

All of the artists discussed their strengths as problem-solvers, but they also described unusual gifts as problem-*finders* (Getzels & Csikszentimihahyi, 1976). This “problem-finding” was thought necessary to maintain interest in a subject. Indeed, all of the artists described themselves as curious about the world and intensely discovery-oriented. Passive learning was less successful than more active control over learning. Three of the artists specifically discussed their enormous reliance on memory. In general as children, they remembered information presented orally, in conversations for example, but also anything they had seen, an image or something they had experienced directly.

Teaching seemed a natural career choice for many of the artists and all of them have been teachers at some point in their careers. Six of the seven artists

mentioned that they like and are very curious about other people, and consequently are very good with the public. All of the artists talked about the importance of communication with others. For the three entrepreneurial artists, contact with the public is a very enjoyable necessity in their business. Although a few say that they are still shy and insecure about their intellects, they nevertheless love to talk and communicate with others. It is a major frustration in their lives that they cannot communicate easily in writing and that reading is still so tedious. While spelling continues to be a source of embarrassment, all have developed strategies to cope with awkward situations. All of the artists talked about desiring to make a positive contribution to the general good. For some, this is the basis of the work they do.

The three youngest artists expressed gratitude that they were dyslexic because they fear that they would not have found clay, and success, otherwise. If they had been all-around achievers, several of the artists expressed fear that they might have been tempted to become insurance salesmen or lawyers, which was their symbol for work that, while it may be an easy and socially acceptable solution to the problem of earning a living, exacts an unacceptable personal toll of dullness and predictability. The artists were also universally united in their advice for young dyslexics: find something that you love and do it with your whole heart. Ignore those who tell you what you can't do and acquaint yourself with your strengths.

Why ceramics?

As discussed above, all of the artists, especially Don Reitz, pinpointed understanding to physical interaction with materials and subject matter, and/or attached narratives. It seems that the relevant characteristic of accessible subjects was the contextualization of the learning. In learning which involved physical interaction, on the farm, in the butcher shop, or on the sport's field, the purpose of learning was evident and the consequences were readily apparent. When learning was attached to a narrative, again, the context was available. In biology and in the art room, both physical interaction and narratives are part of the learning process. Don Reitz illustrated this point when describing his difficulty with ceramic chemistry, until his teacher explained the real-world relevance of the properties of each material and how they interact.

As mentioned above, every artist interviewed described himself as a 'cook.' Each learned what ceramic materials do under different conditions and 'intuitively' knows what will yield the desired results. Ceramics offered each of the interviewed artists opportunities to learn in ways that worked well for him; sensual reinforcement, contexts and narratives were available. Their needs for communication and expression, which may have been somewhat compromised by dyslexia, was readily available in the medium of ceramics because clay is exceptionally receptive to recording feeling. That the usual career choice of ceramic artists is either teaching or small business was ideal. These careers combined their love of making things in clay, their passionate desire to learn and their interest and enjoyment of contact and service with people. Their identity as

'different' and problem-finders, as well as their acquired self-discipline, were positive characteristics for either field. And most importantly, these fields also met their requirements for flexibility. In teaching and in small business, individual variations in method are tolerated, sometimes appreciated, as long as the ultimate goal is achieved.

Chart of Similarities

Quality	Artists
1. Dyslexia commonly unknown	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
2. Diagnosed dyslexic	Greg Wentz, Alan Bennett, Michael Sherrill
3. Rural or suburban upbringing	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
4. Played/worked outside	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
5. Loved narrative play as children, as adults	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
6. Parental or close family member support	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
7. Had a talented, sensitive teacher	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
8. Aware of help / forgiving of non-help	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
9. Singled out in school as stupid or lazy	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning
10. Suffered shyness, self-doubt and insecurity	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
11. Determined to find good	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt
12. Specifically expressed satisfaction with current lives	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Don Reitz
13. Discussed school behavioral problem	John Gill, Randy Schmidt
14. Crystallizing moment / hooked on ceramics	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning
15. Discussed re-inventing self	Michael Sherrill, Randy Schmidt, Greg Wentz (as teens) Les Manning and Don Reitz (in adulthood)
16. described self as a 'cook' ceramist	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
17. Persistence of dyslexic problems into adulthood	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
18. Books on tape	Michael Sherrill, John Gill, Don Reitz
19. Thrive on conversation	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
20. Appreciate practical knowledge, applications	Michael Sherrill, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
21. Appreciate symbol, image, context relationship	Randy Schmidt, Les Manning, Don Reitz, John Gill
22. More successful in higher education	Greg Wentz, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz
23. Bluffing in school	Les Manning, Don Reitz
24. Positive consequences of dyslexia, ie ceramics	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett
25. Complementary strengths with wives	Alan Bennett, John Gill
26. Teacher, small business or combination	Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt, John Gill, Les Manning, Don Reitz

Figure XIX

Chapter IV: Analysis of the Interviews

Success and holding your own

You don't learn to hold your own in this world by standing on your guard, but by attacking, and getting hammered yourself. George Bernard Shaw, Getting Married.

Researchers from a variety of fields have tried to understand the complex patterns of learning differences characteristic of dyslexic individuals. Questions raised have included: What explains poor performance in low-level activities, like word decoding and number sequencing, and yet normal to superior performance in higher level processes like Kohl's (1984) "intellectual sophistication" (p.117), or complex abstract thinking? Why do some symptoms persist and others disappear? Why do symptoms differ from individual to individual? Are there relationships between patterns of strengths and weaknesses? What is nature and what is nurture, and how do they interrelate?

In this study, I have turned the microscope around the other way and asked a small number of successful dyslexic learners to tell their own stories. The themes that emerged concerned 1. the consequences of their dyslexia, 2. the effects of teaching, and 3. the importance of their passionate intellectual interest in the ceramics field. Touching on all of these areas is the development of their identities as 'makers' and 'learners', how this process unfolded, and the conditions they perceived necessary for their success.

Theme 1: Consequences of Dyslexia

Classroom experiences

The literature on dyslexia describes many symptoms which include difficulty learning how to read, slow reading speed, difficulty with numbers, right/left confusion, pronouncing long words, single word decoding, handwriting, etc. (Miles, 1995; Edwards, 1994; Shaywitz, 1989, Fink, 1998). The consequence of this may be early school failure, devastating social tolls (Smith, 1991; Edwards, 1995) and an attitude of learned helplessness (Lawrence, 1985) in which learners become so demoralized by their failure that they cease their struggle to improve their situation.

The artists claimed that their symptoms presented themselves very early in their education. John Gill was held back a year in kindergarten and he thought that he should have been held back again in the first grade. Alan Bennett struggled with learning to tell time in the first grade, which was so traumatic for him that he now has three clocks in every room. He says that most of his problems as an adult can be traced back to these early struggles with dyslexia, (p. 140).

Although subsequent career success has done much to undo the long-term consequences stemming from their dyslexia, several artists acknowledged that as adults they were on guard lest they slip back into old negative patterns. Don Reitz says that because he was always the last one in class to finish assignments, it took him a long time to stop feeling insecure about his intelligence when socializing in intellectual circles. This persisted despite his professorship in a major university, his fame and substantial, well-recognized

contributions to the field of ceramics. Similarly, Les Manning wondered how people with learning disabilities can learn to trust themselves, and what parents and teachers can do to facilitate self-confidence. He told a story about watching a TV program in which a guest on a talk show had spilt coffee on himself because of the poor design of the mug. Although he had developed a mug that would have been perfect for the talk show guests, he was too shy to contact the show about it.

The worst of what happened to all the artists, experiences that set up ongoing self-doubt, began about the third grade. At this time, it was clear to both parents and teachers that the children's skill development was different from their classmates and not improving on its own. Michael Sherrill and John Gill both describe struggling with reading, spelling and writing, and transposing letters and numbers in the second and third grade. Because certain material was incomprehensible to them, some of the children stopped expecting school material to make sense.

GW: ...A teacher showed me a test that I had just taken and he told me to read the question... "What color is grass?" ...I checked "pink." He asked me if I thought that's correct and ...it dawned on me that there actually might be some meaning to the words in the questions.... (p. 78)

Edwards (1994) reports that the support and help from a parent, usually the mother, was necessary for identification and assessment of the children's learning problems. Mothers were described as crying with worry and frustration. They spent many hours with their sons, helping them get organized, doing homework, reading, practicing spelling lists and multiplication tables.

DR: ...She was impatient about the book learning because she knew I was smart. I mean, ...I did many other things well. (p. 276)

Greg Wentz, Michael Sherrill, Alan Bennett, Randy Schmidt and Don Reitz all emphasize the importance of their parents' help and support. Each described their mothers helping them daily with their schoolwork. When this was insufficient, private tutors were hired. In addition, Greg Wentz was transferred from a large public school into a small private school that better fit his needs. He said that all he could remember of his childhood was ten years of summer school and tutors. According to Greg Wentz, the most important thing that this mother did for him was not allowing him to quit. Don Reitz said that he appreciated most how proud his mother was of him and how accepting she was of his interests and talents.

However, homework sheets were 'accidentally' left behind and problems compounded. Several artists claim an uncanny ability to remember trivia, but had terrible problems with information that was important at school.

LM: ...I know all the garbage, but I don't know anything about really good hard stuff [like mathematics and science].... (p. 232)

RS: ...I'd forget the list, but I could always remember what was on it. ...I could remember almost anything that wasn't really important. p.176)

Both Les Manning and Randy Schmidt describe very selective memories. I think it is likely that they remembered things they understood and/or interested them. The likelihood of school failure or punishment was insufficient to help them to remember. These memory, sequencing and organizational problems combined with fatalism to compound already serious school problems. Fortunately for

these artists, they received substantial support at home, and in some cases the parents were very active to insure that their children were treated fairly at school.

RS: They couldn't brush me off completely because my dad would show up in school and raise holy hell if they did anything too bad to me. (p. 181)

The literature on learning disabilities lists serious psychological consequences of repeated school failure ranging from depression and cynicism to difficulty forming and maintaining intimate relationships to criminal behavior (Gilchrist, 1997; Edwards, 1994; Smith, 1991; Osmond & Morrison, 1992). Similarly the artists' themselves linked childhood problems, such as frustration, sadness, behavioral troubles and psychosomatic illnesses with the school failures caused by their dyslexia. The deterioration of their self-esteem and self-confidence occasionally lead to "attention-seeking behavior, withdrawal, or a generally antisocial, anti-authoritarian attitude" (Dominy & Rees, 1997, p. 197). John Gill and Randy Schmidt specifically discussed their behavioral problems in school.

JG: In seventh grade, I went to a private school for boys that was a cross between an orphanage and a school for troubled boys because of an incorrigible stunt I ...played on the ...principal of the school.... (p. 202)

RS: ...I was always being criticized for not doing well, or as well as they thought I could do. ...I ...adopted the role of the class clown: ...since you were gonna get bawled out anyway, why not be cool about it? (p. 174)

Les Manning described bluffing in school and pretending to understand material when he did not. This was so stressful that it made him sick. He distinguished general disinterest from disinterest in specific subject areas in school. He had

many interests in which he was willing to invest substantial time and effort, but he required flexibility. He was interested in “coming at problems from other directions” (p. 235). Like Randy Schmidt, Alan Bennett coped by clowning and utilizing his wit and sense of humor. The problem with this was that he frequently was not taken seriously and was often lonely and misunderstood.

Edwards (1994), Ziminsky (1983), Dominy and Rees (1997) report that dyslexics can expect to suffer harsh treatment in school and soon grow to doubt their intelligence.

MS: Really in many ways, I perceived ...myself as... [missing a cog].
(p. 104)

CA: Did anyone ever tell you that you were smart?

GW: No. ...I think they assumed that I was just lazy. (p. 80)

Likewise, humiliation was used to shake these dyslexic children into greater effort. Obviously since laziness was not the core problem, greater effort alone did not improve performance. The dyslexic children's peers picked up the attitudes of the adults and mercilessly teased them about their school performance. Greg Wentz used the word “brutal” to describe the behavior of the “little kids” who were his classmates. No one could, or would, recount specific instances, but all of the artists referred to the cruelty of their peers.

When greater effort failed, these boys began half-believing that they really were stupid and fearing being perceived as stupid by others. This feeling of intellectual inferiority, which many artists report that they continue to suffer, was well-established by the third or fourth grade, ages 8-10. Michael Sherrill summed it up:

MS: ...By the time I got to third or fourth grade, ...I realized how really stupid I must be. ...The classroom [was set up] so that the slower you were, the further back you sat. Before long, I was sitting in the back row.... The greatest unkindness probably comes from your peers that look at you like, 'Are you stupid?' And I was smart enough to realize how dumb I looked. (p. 104)

Several of the artists reported attempts to motivate them with humiliation: yelling and seating them in the back of the classroom or teachers allowing the children to be ridiculed in class. I suspect that the teachers did not really believe that the artists were stupid, because otherwise why would they insist that they were not living up to their potential? A problem seems to be that the authorities could not imagine a third possibility: that the children were, in numerous ways, highly intelligent, and were trying, but had difficulty with specific areas. Again, as Michael Sherrill remembered:

...I tried. I can remember it being sort of like banging my head against an impenetrable surface. I could not get through; I couldn't solve that problem; I couldn't figure it out. (p. 107)

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993a) would have been extremely useful to the school authorities because intelligence is not defined as an all or nothing, one-shot situation. However for these children, the message clearly received was that they were unintelligent and until their grades improved, they were worthless. They were only valuable human beings when they performed well in school. Oddly, the teasing and humiliations led the children to accept characteristics that do not really go together. They were accused of being *both* lazy and stupid.

Dominy and Rees (1997) and Linda Smith (1991), founder of the Lab School in Washington, DC, each advocate an emphasis on experimental, hands-

on learning for children with learning disabilities. Manipulation of actual objects and materials is essential. Frank Smith (1985), an expert in children's literacy, states that the foremost factors for teaching reading to anyone are the motivational value of interest and the de-motivating value of fear of failure. These coincide with Snowling and Nation's (1997) finding that the effect of contextual information was extremely important for dyslexic readers. Hence, multi-sensory learning activities, which create intense engagement with the subject matter, overcome problems with rote memory.

Even as children, these artists came to the same conclusions. Most of the children began to recognize certain strengths that could be utilized to offset weaknesses. If they could visualize something or otherwise interact physically, they learned it. Although all of the artists discuss this, Don Reitz was the most insistent that his learning always involved physical interactions.

DR: ...Well, we (dyslexics) do very well when we have something in front of us, that has to do with our hands.... (p. 268)

For all the artists, though, adding and subtracting was easier if they had a scale model, names for the things being added ("six bird and seven gorillas," DR, p. 265) or could visualize the patterns of dots on dominoes, RS, p. 175). The artists recognized that establishing visual images in their minds was key to their learning.

JG: I went to school every day. I sat there. Doodling. Drawing. I was trying to take notes. Did the notes make sense? No! There wasn't enough of a picture in my mind.... (p. 206)

Reitz called these visual images physical problems, but in fact examining something physically was just a way to create an image that they all said they needed. Randy Schmidt explained it well: "...If I visually experience something first hand, then I really know it" (p. 186).

The artists also described a great love and interest in the natural world. Art, geometry and biology were named most frequently as successful subjects in school. If materials were presented with the assumption that there were various possible correct answers and many different acceptable roots to those answers, they felt they had a chance. Art was especially loved for this reason. As Greg Wentz said:

...If I'm in a situation now where there are different ways of doing it, then there is a relief. I know I can find my way of doing it. Even if I don't have success at first, I can try it again.... (p. 82)

Any material to be learned that was presented as inflexible, such as elementary mathematics (especially the multiplication tables), grammar and algebra, was daunting.

GW: Math was brutal and English was tough. ... There were only certain ways to solve the problems in those classes and I didn't have great success in doing it [the way they wanted me to]. (p. 79)

Yet, a few artists discussed success in math by working out word problems using little models of the objects in the problem. Perhaps the combination of the visualization with the attached story, contextualized the math problem, rendering it interesting enough to pursue.

LM: ...If I had known the abstract side, instead of just the basic memorization skills which was how it was taught at that particular time-- if I could've maybe understood the [principles involved in the

subject and how they are manifested in the real world], maybe I'd have done better. But that was never brought to my attention.... I probably learned things in later life, because I could see the purpose. (p. 241)

Since many of these artists reported a great interest in people, any story about people, how they lived and worked, how they governed themselves, and what they cared about was particularly interesting. History, fiction, poetry, religion, mythology were commonly named fascinations.

LM: ... I absolutely went crazy over... [poetry], I mean it made so much sense...! This was really, truly an incredible, expressive way of talking about something... just like a love affair; it was a romantic thing. ...I just devoured poetry, ...[took it] really seriously. (p. 235)

If an adult were to present these types of literature orally, the artists displayed strong evidence of Kohl's (1984) intellectual sophistication; they interacted imaginatively with the material and were then well able to contribute to class discussions. Already the children were analyzing patterns of success and failure.

DR: And because it was so difficult to read, I just didn't read things. I would listen to stories, you know, and I would pretend a great deal. I was a great pretender. (p. 264)

Success meant getting a picture in their minds. Kohl (1986) states that for some the development of intellectual sophistication occurs through manipulation of sensual stimuli: sound, touch, or visual images. The artists thought that they used a fuller measure of their senses to understand difficult subjects in school. However, their language also suggests that there are unexpected benefits to this use of their senses: it seemed to have stirred their imaginations and they unconsciously utilized metaphor to create better understandings. This point is made particularly well by both Michael Sherrill and John Gill:

MS: When I was a kid, I'd get something new and fascinating, and I'd carry it around with me, ...kept it in my hands and ...look at it, feel it, and think about it. ...I'm the same way now: I make a new tool or something... and I do that same process of carrying it around with me and holding it in my hand, ...touching and looking and rotating the object. (p. 113)

JG: ...What I've learned is that everything is basically based on pictures. I have images of what I talk about.... I listen to a lot of musicals or books on tapes. ...Every time I listen to them, they become a different story.... (p. 221)

Difference and Identity:

Perhaps because of the negative consequences they suffered, the young artists clearly invested much thought into comparing themselves to others, and most came to the conclusion that they were different, an exception. Many defined themselves as anti-authoritarian. Others claimed to be loners; all defined themselves as visual learners, they encode information using images. These four qualities are common characteristics of both dyslexics (Dominy & Rees, 1997; Shaywitz, 1989) and successful artists (Getzel & Cziksentiilaly, 1987; Winner & Casey, 1992). Their strengths and their struggles became defining factors. Possibly the early and on-going effort to understand themselves played a large part in their eventual success because they never viewed themselves as average in any respect.

MS: Now in a mature view, I do realize that I see the world different than most people do, and that's not necessarily better or worse. It only means I see it from a different point of view. (p. 127)

In the process of trying to understand themselves and how they learned, the young artists were developing their identities. When I refer to identity development, I mean the point where an individual notices certain patterns that

are key to his/her personality, a persistence of characteristics that suggest a unified structure. As these children grew, they learned, painfully, that they could not do some of the things that others could do easily. In part this made them different, but they also recognized that their thinking processes were different.

JG: Oh, Grandma ...said: *'He's going about things in a different way.'* ...She was able to figure out ways that she could support the creative side. (p. 204)

LM: I have a strange way of doing things. I never really pay attention to something until I understand the purpose of it. [For example,] I told you earlier about traveling: I'll go to someplace and see it, and come back and read about it. (p. 241)

On the other hand as children, the artists discovered that they were not consistently incompetent; they had unusual talents. Some of them got better at camouflaging their weakness, but all of them also began to discover ways that they excelled, too.

MS: ...In the sixth and seventh grade, all of a sudden, I started making everything: models, ...there was not anything mechanical in the house that was safe. My mother would come into a room and I'd have a clock torn apart, the back off a radio or something. Most times, I destroyed stuff, but eventually I started figuring out how things worked and how to fix things. (p. 105)

Not every artist defined himself as different. Don Reitz, who at 72, is the eldest among these artists, and claims never to have felt particularly different from other children:

...I never noticed anything different. ...Obviously I'm visually oriented—and that really helped me a great deal. Going through school, it was difficult, but I'd rather be running a trap line or fishing than being in school anyhow. So I didn't pay a hell of a lot of attention to it all anyhow, I guess. (p. 264)

It may be that Don Reitz was surrounded by unusually tolerant adults who appreciated that everyone is unique, with different interests and talents. It may also be that he was perceived to be very skilled in ways that mattered a great deal to the family's security, like hunting for food, dressing meat, gardening, canning vegetables and earning money. Most of his stories of his childhood refer to ways that brought money into the household by doing chores for neighbors or selling arrowheads that he had found. There is less opening to interpret his disability as a character flaw: he was so clearly not lazy. All of the artists I interviewed had this in common to some extent. The major difference seems to be the degree to which the things in which they invested effort were valued. At a very early age, Don Reitz was contributing in concrete ways to the family's survival. This is, in part, a major generational difference.

For the other artists, their feelings of difference were initially negative, but they later interpreted their difference positively.

LM: ...But then because [I'm quick in other ways], I have a great imagination. So my imagination will start working with those words I've already read, ...creating a story [about what's going on].
(p. 234)

At about age thirteen, there were definite improvements in the boys' overall performance. The children were growing up and perhaps unaffected areas of their brains were able to take over the affected language functions (Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987) or perhaps they developed better coping skills. Maybe the change of focus in the curriculum in the upper grades put more emphasis on their unaffected thinking skills rather than rote memory. Perhaps there were more

opportunities to shine. Art courses taught by specialist art teachers are more prevalent in high schools; so perhaps their artistic successes were taken more seriously by themselves and others.

All the artists noticed their strengths and began to use these strengths to cope. The gradual building up of knowledge, experience coupled with imagination to fill in the blanks. In part, coping entailed a satisfying irony: these dyslexics were curious, had an intense desire to learn and an extreme capacity for hard work, a quality few people attributed to these children. As Randy Schmidt said, "I like knowing about things," (p. 186).

Theme 2: Good Teaching in the classroom

According to Kohl (1984), there are two broad parts to good teaching. The first part consists of helping learners recognize and appreciate their strengths and interests. The second part involves using those strengths and weakness to teach material that they do not already know, helping students to build up a store of knowledge, which in turn supports future learning. Each of these artists at different points in their lives came into contact with good teachers who helped them to understand their patterns of learning and how their strengths could be marshaled. As Herbert Kohl (1984) states: "Understanding the complex relationships between self-growth and nurturing growth is essential to becoming a good teacher,"(p. 5).

In addition to perceptiveness about their students and the ability to organize material in interesting ways, these teachers, also, invariably displayed

passion and excitement for the discipline being taught. Finally, these teachers demonstrated persistence.

When there are students like ...[these children], the first question to ask is whether the students' resistance to learning is justified. The next step is to discover a way to reach out to the resistant or defiant students and take their pain, their objections, their suggestions, and their defiance seriously. ...It's easy to give up on difficult students, (Kohl, 1984, p. 83).

As illustrated in their humiliating educational experiences, the artists' resistance to the school culture makes sense.

JG: ...This history teacher had just read one of my papers and said out loud in front of my friend and maybe four or five other students: *'You must be illiterate.'* He could have said: *'Let me talk with you privately about your paper.'* It was a public statement. (p. 215)

Accepting a view of themselves as presented by many of their school experiences would have been to accept themselves as failures. Ironically, the factor that helped these artists to separate the negative identities that their schools reflected back to them from Learning, itself, were experiences of good teaching, which excited their imaginations. This good teaching made it possible and safe to invest the effort needed to succeed.

“Loving the students as learners:”

As discussed in the literature review, “loving the students as learners” (Kohl, 1984) means paying attention to their particular strengths, weaknesses, interests and usual modes of learning, and then acting accordingly. Another term that might describe this kind of “teaching sensibility” (Kohl, 1984) is mentorship. Throughout the interviews, I was hugely impressed by the extent to which every

artist acknowledged good teachers and focused on the positive. Even when discussing very painful incidents, most artists did not want to belabor them. When a teacher did something that I thought was appalling, the artists for the most part bent over backwards to excuse this hurtful behavior. I suspect that the artists' attitude about past hurtful incidents makes it easier for them to maintain a positive eye on the future.

Yet each of the artists also recounted experiences of caring, thoughtful and persistent teachers. Michael Sherrill's principal pulled him out of class to help him with his reading. Les Manning's art teacher helped him get through high school and enroll in art school. Randy Schmidt said that there were people who believed in him: "She believed in me and I thought, 'Okay, I'll play ball,'" (p. 196).

Although each of the artists benefited from extraordinary teaching, John Gill's high school English teacher (please see Don Bunger's interview in the appendices) was the most dramatic example described. This teacher not only read the assignments orally to John and made time for individual discussion sessions, he also made analogies between things John knew and liked (making and appreciating art) and the things that John found difficult (reading and writing). Don Bunger also allowed John Gill to respond to literature by making sculptures, rather than insisting that he always write papers.

JG: ...Every day, I'd try to read [the assigned text but had terrible trouble], and so every day, after school I'd go to the... [English teacher] who would read to me from the assignment. ... In senior year, he told me about putting a concept into a sentence and taking a concept out of a sentence. That's something that you should tell

a ...first grader. That's what reading's about, but he ...[presented it] to me just like you'd explain making [and appreciating] a piece of art. He'd read me something; I'd go home and make a piece of sculpture. He'd read me another thing ...[and so on]. (p. 209)

Sometimes, the good teacher or mentor was also a peer, as in the case of Don Reitz's roommate who was also studying to be a teacher. This peer-mentor not only identified Don Reitz's reading problem, but developed strategies that enabled him to pass a course that required extensive reading.

DR: Let's say History was a hard one for me, ...[a fellow student]... would record [our conversation about the material that was going to be on the test].... Then, he'd play the recording back, you know, and he would... [repeat] the answers we'd come up with. And that's how I went through my damn History test. (p. 276)

As a result of this care and attention given to them by their mentors, the artists began to blossom:

MS: ...I was in the top...quarter of my graduating class. It was because I just listened and I had teachers that would allow me to be graded on the content of what I'd heard rather than my ability to spell properly. (p. 109-10)

It was at this point in adolescence that the artists, having sampled success, began imagining that there might be something better for them. I believe that the teachers who gave them a taste of, even limited, success set them up for their substantial future success. The adolescent 'artists' intended to be successes in something. Their task now was to find the field that would permit them to shine.

Good Teaching in the clay studio:

Except for Michael Sherrill, who was almost exclusively self-taught, each of the artists told stories of powerful teaching and mentorship in the ceramics studio. Presumably most people who wind up in ceramics careers probably experienced good teaching. Ceramics is a field that rarely offers either high

social status or financial security. There are other significant attractions to the field of ceramics which good teaching helps students to recognize. But it also never surprises me when people who love a field and are determined to learn find someone to guide them. These teachers gave their students the impression that they were sharing something wondrous about which they themselves were very excited.

John Gill described in loving detail his experiences in art school of people talking with him about things that they had found in the library. Another teacher taught the history of ceramics by describing amazing, and probably entirely non-existent, ceramic objects. He sent the students on wonderful treasure hunts to find them. Similarly, Don Reitz struggled with glaze chemistry until Val Cushing at Alfred explained:

'Look, Don, here you go: see this column? This does not melt. See this column, all these things will cause it to melt. And see this column, that's what will keep the damn thing from running off the pot' (p. 269)

Alan Bennett told about his teacher, Randy Schmidt, whose enthusiasm for learning in ceramics was contagious. Alan says that the way Randy taught was very exciting, and that because of the way he taught, Alan began an on-going fascination with kilns and firing. He remembers one experiment particularly clearly:

AB: ...One time...we got some pure oxygen and some oil and used the oxygen instead of a blower with a little tiny, oh gosh, an atomizer, and we fired a kiln. It was like a rocket the way that flame went through the air. ...That's gotta be 25 years ago, but I remember like it was yesterday, and I found that very exciting. It got me very excited about kilns and burners and fuels and everything else. (p. 149)

I am unsure if the interviewed dyslexic artists loved their field first or if they were taught to love it. In his book on creativity, Howard Gardner (1993b) describes a “crystallizing moment” in which the creative person recognizes his or her medium. As described earlier, this certainly occurred for each of the seven artists. But it remains unclear if this recognition was nurtured by teachers or if it was purely a natural affinity. However, I am certain that these encouraging encounters with teachers, in all areas, taught the artists that they had significant resources that they could use to learn. Most importantly, these teachers taught them how to use their minds productively, how to formulate complex theories about the relationships of ideas, and not to be afraid to care passionately about those ideas. They gave them real reasons to believe in themselves and the contributions that they could make.

The concept of belief was very important to Randy Schmidt and very much informs his current teaching practice.

RS: Through... [some teachers], I realized that I could do it. ...I guess they allowed me to be me, ...that I was all right, even though I was... doing things differently. I never forgot that. That's why I became a teacher. I wanted to pay them back and I really couldn't. They both told me to just pass on the information. Pass on the... energy and I guess I've been doing it for 32 years. (p. 189)

I think he put his finger right on the main point when he said that belief means having faith that the learners have resources. It means helping them to discover and strengthen those resources: how to be themselves while negotiating the world around them.

Most of the interviewed ceramists become teachers:

It may seem odd that people who had suffered, as these artists did, at the hands of educational authorities would want, themselves, to become teachers. Yet most of them do teach. It may simply be that teaching is a job that pays more regularly than selling their artwork. Yet the passion many of the artists expressed for helping others to learn suggests that their reasons have more to do with whatever it is that calls anyone else to teach. Perhaps the answer speaks poetically of the power of the good teaching that the artists did receive and how much they appreciated it. Maybe it was the only way to thank the teachers who cared about their success. Many of the artists have said that their teaching is a complicated combination of liking people, love of their field and what they have learned about learning.

GW: I liked the fact that I was affecting people. I was helping people. I was showing them how to do something that they didn't know how to do before. If you teach, it's your legacy, ...showing these younger people, educating them, showing them how to do something and seeing the enjoyment and the passion in their eyes and faces. (p. 91)

These dyslexic artists enjoy and benefit from communicating with other people; they like being around other people. Les Manning and Michael Sherrill talk about affecting people in a positive way. They love exploring how others' think and exploring, as John Gill said, "...what sort of strategy they utilized," (p. 205).

I think our teaching practice is, in part, informed both by our own learning experiences and by the teaching we have received. Both positive and negative consequences of being dyslexic emerged mixed together when they discussed

their own teaching practice. This is where the artists insist that there is a silver lining even to terrible and hurtful experiences. For example, Randy Schmidt insisted that because he was thought a dummy, he is now powerfully determined to help the underdogs to find their strengths. He says that failure is likely if you tell students that they are unable to do something. He insists that just because *he* cannot do something, it does not mean that *they* will not find a way. Similarly, Les Manning suffered terribly from his many school failures. Perhaps because of this, he designed the Ceramics Programme at the Banff Centre to be a safe place for young artists to grow, to have the courage to take the risks necessary to make breakthroughs in their art. Had he not known what it was like to feel unsupported and afraid of failure, the ceramics studio would have been very different. Furthermore as someone wounded by his experiences, Les Manning says that part of his emphasis in teaching involves the healing properties of working with clay in a “respectful way.” John Gill talks about helping students to problem-solve by teaching them the perceptual habits that he utilizes to cope with dyslexia, such as finding unusual tangents and connections among ideas.

For many, their teaching is about service and contribution. Michael Sherrill says that the most important thing that he has learned concerns acknowledging both his own and others' strengths:

MS: I think that my society needs me and I need my society. I need the other qualities that other people bring to the table and it's not something I should be arrogant about.... (p. 127)

LM: That is extremely important to me... It's about giving. (p. 257)

Despite experiences that might make others bitter and misanthropic, these individuals actively look for ways to contribute to others' well-being. Non-dyslexics are not exempt from fear of failure, feelings of inferiority or futility. According to Deborah Meier (1995), "Intellectual risk-taking requires safety; children who are suspicious of a school agenda cannot work up to their potential," p. 24. Providing a place of safety is only partially a matter of gaining students' trust. The other part, I think, involves helping students feel powerful by encouraging their strengths. Knowing the importance for everyone of feeling whole, undamaged and powerful, these artist-teachers place their emphasis on helping others to appreciate and accept their individuality, to achieve and be proud of their achievements.

Theme 3: The importance of ceramics

Prior to encountering ceramics, the student-artists had positive experiences in a variety of visual arts. Because people who cared about them wanted them to have something positive in their lives, they encouraged the children to participate in a variety of activities that were accessible despite their poor reading and writing (Edwards, 1994; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991). Many described art as a relief and an escape from classroom failure. The artists did not encounter clay until later in their lives, but what they described about the visual arts education they received was also true of ceramics:

AB: ...It didn't matter to me what anybody thought of it. I didn't do it for anybody else but myself. I just wanted to make art all the time and I did. (p. 143)

Shaywitz (1996) says that typical dyslexic strengths are reasoning, problem-solving, concept formation and critical thinking. The artists discussed art in terms of rewarding and accentuating their strengths, such as imagination, creativity, intuitive understandings of visual imagery, and interests in doing something physical. Corresponding with Gardner's (1993b) "crystallizing moment", Les Manning explains:

... With me, there's an intuitive process and that intuitive process is crucial to one's well-being. There's something natural just going on and something really clicks.... (p. 244)

Art-making had been viewed as a continuation of the boys' play/work outside of school. Greg Wentz described his associations with working in clay as playing in mud puddles as a child (p. 88) and Michael Sherrill says that, "a sense of play and experimentation comes to my art and to [all the things I make]," (p. 120). Art was both an outlet and a way of playing (as in Kohl's, 1984, "giuoco," play as a prelude to learning). Michael Sherrill sums up many of the artists' feeling about the importance for them of imaginative work/play:

...I think it was really acting out a lot of the inner life, a lot of the fantasy. I was fascinated early on by American Indians and loved scouting. ...So I made things that... corresponded to that kind of imagined world. (p. 107-08).

Taught well, art also rewards alternate solutions to problems (Eden, 1996), which they came to believe was the way that they could be successful. Don Reitz said that coming to art was natural for him because it was so flexible and expressive. Alan Bennett suggested that these play/work art-making experiences shaped him. He not only improved his ability to find alternate solutions to problems, but also learned to value those solutions. He repeatedly attributes his success in

both his art-making and small business to his trusting a way of thinking that was already natural to him, but which improved because of the art training.

In addition, as student-artists, the boys felt so confident in their art courses that other's approval was not so important. By the same token, it provided them with a rare sense of achievement and accomplishment. Alan Bennett described his first recognition that he was really good at something: "I was able to throw big cylinders almost right away and nobody else in the room could, and I thought: *'Ah! I guess I'm good at this!'* (p. 148). Because they could be successful, they worked really hard to improve their art skills. Ironically, approval came whether they wanted it or not. It was a self-perpetuating cycle: success in a field where success was possible encouraged effort, making success probable. Art-making provided motivation, which encouraged hard work.

MS: [Frustrated by dyslexia], there were also little things that were giving me something back. ...I excelled in the art department and I was a little star there. (p. 107)

GW: I worked harder than everyone else because I kinda had to, ...I had to over-compensate for the other areas of failure.... (p. 83)

Social reinforcement was also present. Because the boys were successful, they felt appreciated by others and made friends. Greg Wentz made this point particularly clearly:

...Feeling comfortable, feeling that I was around people that liked me because I was having success in what I was doing. ...I felt proud that I was actually doing something and I wasn't backing out of it. ...So I was proud and I was enjoying the fact that I could give these little refrigerator art masterpieces away and they were appreciated, not only to my parents, but friends' parents. ...It was just a generally great feeling that I was appreciated. I wasn't failing. (p. 83)

Art even provided both a method and the motivation to persevere with reading.

Corresponding with Fink (1992) and Snowling and Nation (1997), the artist

leaned heavily on contextual knowledge to gain access to texts. Michael Sherrill described pouring through books and magazines in order to learn more about ceramics. In fact, Michael Sherrill said that the writing in art and ceramics texts was ideal because there were short, concise written segments illustrated with photographs or drawings. He already had an exceptional visual memory, so the illustrations prompted him about the concepts presented in the writing. Being pre-warned about the subject area gave him better access to the words. He found that the more he read these books, the more he was able to get out of them (see pages 116, 131).

In many subject areas, the tendency is to treat learning as a one-shot deal. Essays and tests are graded and returned and students move on to the next subject. These essays and tests generally are not repeated without penalty. However in art, very little is deemed a complete failure, just as very little cannot be improved. Therefore art study taught them not to be overly discouraged by small imperfections at the same time they learned to set high goals.

MS: ...There's a lot of ideas that I have that just don't work, the theories sound good, they look good, I try them and... they don't fly. ...That's okay. I fail every once in a while. ...But I also have 20 or 30... [tools I've made] I couldn't work without.... (p. 119)

Artists regularly work in series, ending a series when they run out of things to learn and say about the subject. A discovery mentality is rewarded in the art field (Getzels & Csikszentmihaly, 1980), and the young artists already knew that they wanted very badly to learn. Alan Bennett compares his intellectual restlessness to playing computer games:

Once you've done all the levels [of a computer game], what's the point in playing...anymore? Same thing with my art, once I've gotten to a certain level with something, I stay on that level for awhile. But then I get excited to see what's beyond the next hill. ...That excites me. (p. 155)

A similar thought was expressed by Les Manning when he described the excitement of the participants in the Ceramics Programme at Banff: "We were all mad, mad scientists..." (p. 253)

During art critiques, both successful and less successful elements are discussed in terms of improving future artwork. Art students who make mistakes are shown techniques that will improve results. It is expected, even required by some art teachers, for students to repeat less successful pieces; hence, repeating a piece until satisfied is not considered a remedial situation, but just normal learning. Furthermore artists, to a large degree, retain control over the problems they tackle (Getzels & Csikszentmihaly, 1980; Winner & Casey, 1992). In various ways, several artists discussed the importance of ownership of their learning and the importance of problem-finding.

GW: ...To me a piece is successful] ...if it's part of who you are, part of your experience. (p. 94)

RS: I like that part when...we start making our own problems. [It is more interesting] trying to work our way out of a problem that we've set up ourselves.... (p. 188)

Art fit very well, it challenged the artists' thinking without penalizing them for poor reading skills. Already having an identity of difference, art, which celebrates originality and distinctiveness, felt right. Randy Schmidt explained that art helped him to think in different ways, and because of that he felt unique.

But more importantly he could do his art his way, using his "...own brain, the one that I was supposed to have" (p. 194). Art provided the young artists with a way to communicate and a real reason to be proud of their accomplishments. As Michael Sherrill said, it was a way out, a window of opportunity.

MS: It's hard for anybody to know what it's like to be inside of something that most people consider to be easy, but which is for you incredibly daunting, just unable to do the simplest of things.... I see that now, and I see the amount of discouragement that was created through that humiliation, trying to grasp at some sense of self-worth and not being able to, not really. ...I always found myself struggling to be heard or to express myself clearly, struggling to organize myself in order to express the things that I felt or thought. Art really became a physical way of doing that. Now that I look back, I know that's really what happened. Art was a very tangible way for me to do some of those things that I couldn't do verbally. (p. 108-09)

Specific references to clay:

As described earlier, most of the artists were introduced to ceramics only as young adults in college rather than as children, and this introduction was accidental. They had not intended to study ceramics. Yet after a chance encounter, clay became very important to them. Howard Gardner (1993b) also refers to this instant of recognition as terribly important in the lives of the creative people he studied. Michael Sherrill describes this best, and even compares finding clay to a religious awakening or a marriage:

MS: ...When I came to clay, it was like there was truly an epiphany. ...I knew this is what I wanted to do in my life. I knew this is the material that allowed me the most scope. ...When it came to clay, I could spend a lifetime working my tail off ...and never understand everything about it. It's just an incredibly vast, incredibly interesting and complex, and it was something that was attainable. (p. 113)

Les Manning and Greg Wentz described similarly sudden, intense and

permanent feelings of commitment to the field of ceramics. Impossible to ignore, it was more a calling to a vocation than simply finding a way to make a living. They had an affinity for the material, but they were madly in love with clay because it was both infinitely challenging and attainable.

Ceramics felt natural to these artists. In fact the artists seemed to identify directly with the clay and use the properties of clay as metaphors to describe themselves. A field in which anthropomorphism is rampant (clay body, lip, shoulders, belly, foot of a pot, clay has a memory and is forgiving, etc.), the other way worked too. These artists fit the clay; they were like the clay. As John Gill said: "incorrigible."

JG: I think I like clay because it's incorrigible, but then you can be kind to it, and it'll do some really nice things for you. (CA: *How do you be kind to it?*) By letting it go through some of its own stages--... some sort of respect. I love how dumb it is. It's like going through life thinking that you're dumb and then knowing that you're really not, and then playing with this clay that you know is just dumb dirt. (p. 219)

If you are respectful of the clay for what it is and how it must behave, it can do more than expected. The artists already knew this about themselves. In the studio, they were accepted for who they were, rewarded for strengths, weaknesses recognized but accommodated. As illustrated above, they also found understanding teachers who worked hard to help them succeed.

RS: It was a relief to find something that I was good at, that I understood. Then it was okay to be me. (p. 193)

Learning by doing is the rule of thumb in clay studios. First students work with wet clay, get to know how it responds to the touch and how to control that

response. Later students are presented with glaze problems in a practical way: this is how you get color, line, pattern, texture, and waterproofing, too. They learn about materials by watching them interact in the kiln—the glaze tests. These are quick scientific experiments in which students can see tangible enactments of how materials respond to time and temperature.

LM: There's something about the process of learning that comes with the territory, and I think we ...need that territory. ...It's learning through process.... (p. 249)

Good notes mean that the student can repeat a satisfactory glaze, or alter an unsatisfactory one, at will. Theory usually follows, but by this time a picture is firmly established in the mind. Many other fields may follow this pattern, but these artists believe that clay was ideal for them because it responded so well to the way they naturally think, learn, communicate and express their feelings. As Don Reitz described using the potter's wheel to think, responding to the situation directly. He describes using "intuition" but this is really past experience, mastery of skills:

...I guess I'm thinking while I'm working, and that's why I like the wheel so much...over the years. ...The wheel was a great spontaneous way to think. You're just thinking as it's moving, as... [the piece] is growing, you're making decisions. I enjoy making decisions in the moment. ...The decision-making was an instant thing and it relied on your intuition. (p. 281)

Both spontaneous gestures and highly-labored design are equally recorded in clay. This relationship with the field was probably healing because it was honest, safe and exhilarating. There no longer existed the possibility of cheating, says Les Manning. The artists handled the clay in a way that worked or the piece

broke; they kept good glaze notes or the glaze was unrepeatable; no bluffing allowed. Les Manning also says that working in clay is soothing to him. Don Reitz concurs. Part of the healing process was learning acceptance of the self. For Don Reitz, his five-year-old self was like a spirit coming out of the past to teach both him and his niece the courage to remake themselves into healthy people:

DR: Both physical and mental healing; ...Obviously the clay became more of a mental healing between Sarah and me, because she's trying to recover from Leukemia. The healing is more about saying: *'Hey, I'm a good person.'* ...that search for my five year-old, for that freedom of being five again. Again, it turned into a subject matter about ...about finding yourself, ...find[ing] ...the strength to become, your persona, you might say. (p. 281)

Because there is so much to know, sometimes textual literacy is necessary, but as described above even the reading material is accessible:

MS: ... Clay books were small chapters, small ideas, big concepts sometimes.... I read, slowly, but I read...; I read it all. (p. 131)

Because of all of these things, I believe that clay was the glue, the serendipitous solution, through which these artists could feel whole and undamaged. As successful adults the problems of dyslexia, organization, slow reading speed, difficulty with numbers, have not entirely disappeared. They continue to flip numbers and have difficulty writing. Reading continues to be slow and arduous. Some complain that it hurts their business. Some say that they are still easily intimidated.

Not everything is easy, but because what matters in ceramics is results, the route can be individualized. For those who still feel the pain from the negative consequences of their dyslexia, the ease with which feelings and ideas

can be expressed is important. All the artists described their art as a reaction to events in their lives, about who they are and what they think. Don Reitz said that this gives you faith in yourself, which is healing:

...If you start making your mind feel okay and accepting who you are, accepting the way you work and the fact that... that's who I am! ...That gives you faith in yourself, you know? That's a great healing experience...." (p. 284)

The art is in response to their lives. It is not that clay remembers for them. Clay is a vehicle by which each could tell his own story until he extracted all the possible meaning from the experiences. That means that making their artwork involves symbolic play/work with the events in their lives. Randy Schmidt describes an image that begins many of his art series, which involved hunting and the death of a dove:

...There's that strange instant transformation of something, flying gracefully, and then suddenly it's not. It folds and it's like-- ...Like a dead bird in the road: It's something that was once this incredible free, mobile, fantastic thing in nature, and there it is all run over with a tire mark across it. (p. 190)

The artists compensated; they intended to be successful. "It's no good saying it's not fair," (p. 147) as Alan Bennet said, it is reality. They double check numbers, work hard and figure out systems to organized themselves. Les Manning said that it was extremely important for him to prove his worth and make a contribution. For Les Manning, compensation meant using areas of confidence to offset feelings of shyness and intimidation. He described standing behind his wheel to give himself the courage to speak in public or conduct a workshop.

The artists all had advice for youngsters who are struggling to cope with learning problems. The advice reflects all three categories: what they learned

about themselves as dyslexic learners, what they were taught about how to be successful and the importance of finding a passion in life. All of them recommended that young dyslexics focus on discovering and “polishing” (DR: p. 286) their strengths. They all said that everyone has problems, not just them, or as Les Manning said: “Nothing goes through this world... unscathed in some way,” (p. 247) Therefore, it is important to find ways to contribute.

Analysis Conclusion:

Although I only looked for research subjects who had dyslexia, ceramics and success in common, what I found were many similarities in the events of their lives. I suspect that there are explanations for this other than my own role as researcher. Besides their dyslexia, career and success in common, the artists are, also, male, middle-aged (except Don Reitz who is a generation older), North American, and heterosexual. They all like to hunt, watch movies, fish and hike. They also like to cook, and several like to sew. Six of them are fathers and referred to their parental role. Some of them know each other; some do not. Under these circumstances, it is perhaps unremarkable that the footprints are similar. Are these similarities significant factors in their choice of career, or in their success and compensation? I suspect they are.

What is the relationship between dyslexia and career success?

The characteristics that Winner and Casey (1992) attribute to artists, such as a perception of difference, being a loner and encoding information visually were also characteristics of the interviewed dyslexics. Getzels and Csikszentmaly (1976) claim that artists tend to be problem-finders and these artists found that

setting up their own problems was part of creating interest in their work.

Furthermore, the artists learned that to compensate, they had to pay attention and to trust their strengths, while making allowances for their weaknesses. They learned how to set up conditions they thought they needed to be successful, for example flexibility or multiple correct answers, problem-finding, the possibility of individualizing their problem-solving methods and intense interest in their work. Through instances of success, they also came to believe in their power to change and influence what happens to them. Because many felt that the 'easier' or more common ways of making a living were unavailable to them, they put all their eggs into one basket, pinned all their hopes on something they love very much.

These artists are, first and foremost, intensely curious and interested in learning. Because of the family support and good teaching they experienced, the artists-as-children tasted a portion of success. These parents and teachers helped the dyslexic children to come to an understanding of their learning processes, excited them about discovery within a discipline of study, or steered them towards ways that they could participate and contribute in school. In essence, they accepted the children for who they were and helped them to do the same. While Kohl (1984) calls this "loving the learner," Randy Schmidt describes it as belief:

...I guess believing in somebody is just kind of like allowing people to find their own way, not the way that I think it should be done, but to help them find their own tracks. (p. 196)

Belief implies a willingness and a determination to act. Perhaps because

someone believed in them, these artists care deeply about understanding the world and how it works, and they are willing to invest considerable effort if the playing field is reasonably level.

Maybe as a result, the artists-as-children came to dream that there was something better; they did not have to be failures. They had reason to hope and things to hope for-- goals and aspirations. They remade themselves, put themselves in the right frame of mind to recognize a window of opportunity when it appeared. Having decided to be successful, what remained was to find the right medium.

Why does it matter that success was found in the field of ceramics?

As Michael Sherrill said about coping with dyslexia, "The way I did it, I just grabbed onto the thing that I did well," (p. 112). Clay was the perfect medium for these individuals; they *could* be successful, and instances of success bred courage, of which they required generous portions. The ceramics studio was one place that they could learn easily, where most of their conditions for learning were met, supporting their "resiliency" (Challener, 1997). Ceramics was accessible to them despite literacy problems, but encouraged improvement in literacy. Ceramics literature is often presented with images, short captions and short, well-organized segments of information. The more they learned from doing, the more they were able to understand in the texts, which in turn supported their art-making. Contextualized, global understandings of knowledge is rewarded, but there is rarely a circumstance when working with clay where

speed or rote memory has much real life imperative. Facts can always be double-checked. Similarly, creativity and multi-sensory learning and ways of knowing is admired and appreciated.

The artists were good at the necessary skills, and being good at something made them feel well-liked, accepted and important as valuable contributors. Feeling well-liked and thinking that they could be successful encouraged effort and perseverance. The artists experienced good teaching in the ceramics studio, too, that accommodated how they learned. They felt that the field was so enormously broad that they could always find something new to learn and could never become bored.

Finally and most importantly, they could express themselves, their thoughts, ideas and their feelings. In informal conversations with Michael Sherrill, I was astonished that he used the image of being trapped in a house to describe his dyslexia, and that coming to terms with dyslexia was like finding the doors and windows. This shocked me because I, also, had previously used that metaphor in an essay on dyslexia called "A House With Doors." However I have since come to think that finding the right medium, which in this case was clay, was not escaping the house, but rather finding a way home. It was not an escape from the Self, but a return. All of the artists, having suffered educational circumstances that pinched and chaffed, immediately recognized ceramics as a relief, a fit like growing, living skin. To paraphrase Randy Schmidt, it was then ok to be who they were.

Is it significant that the subjects all expressed enormous interest in fiction and historical narratives from an early age? Might there be a relationship between resilience and the narratives? As was discussed, to some degree or another, all of the artists suffered trauma as a result of their learning disability. John Gill was “whipped” (p. 202) at school for misspellings; in fact, he was separated from his large family and all his neighborhood friends for two years because of behavioral problems stemming from his dyslexia. All of the artists claim that their artwork was in response to lived experience and most of them described their artwork as narrative. All said that their artwork is a sense-making activity, a way of understanding the events in their lives. Johnson and Winograd (1985), Long (1994, a,b), Lawrence (1985), Gilchrist, 1997; Thomson, 1997a; Edwards (1994), Linge (1997) and many others suggest that for compensation, the dyslexic must first establish control over a meaningful part of their lives. Without experiences of control, people sink into stagnation, despair and depression (Seligman, 1975; Abrahams, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). Perhaps control occurs in two parts, perception and reflection about the patterns related to a problem, and then developing and putting into practice strategies that alter the patterns (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1991).

One interpretation of the stories presented here is that one way of recovering from trauma is to create a safe place from which to reflect on the meaning of events in their lives. Ceramics is, then, a safe house from which these artists launched their explorations. Zurmuehlen (1981) wrote that narratives are powerful ways to examine relationships and patterns in events.

Therefore, these constructed narratives, in this case ceramic narrative work, are attempts to understand and make sense of their experience. The 'sense' made concerns Thunder-McGuire's (1999) "integrating function" or "a mediation between what happened and the meaning of what happened" (p.10-11). They "played" with and examined their lives from different perspectives until they had extracted all the meaning from their experiences.

Les Manning intentionally set up the ceramics program at the Banff Centre to be a safe place for artists to break ground with new directions in their artwork. Was he operating from another level of understanding of how to be successful in a dangerous atmosphere? Would it be too much of a leap to suggest that the field of ceramics was that safe haven for all the artists, a place where it was acceptable to be who they are, from which they could construct narratives that explained their experience of the world, perhaps making the stories come out right, 'right' meaning to heal?

Don Rietz explained the 'Sarah' series as a conversation about acceptance and identity, making it possible to heal. In this narrative, he and his niece did, in fact, make it come out right because whatever happens in the future to either one of them in terms of health, they have erased the fear that disrupts their enjoyment of their lives.

Is the resilience a matter of hope and belief that something better is possible? Hope and belief are sentimental-sounding concepts, but I think that they are both key and related to work in a friendly medium that renders the world comprehensible, or at least manageable. However sentimental, the artists

believe that working in clay has healing properties. While “hope” implied longing, “belief” suggests a willingness to act:

What to believe in, exactly, may never turn out to be half as important as the daring act of belief. A willingness to participate in sunlight, and the color red. An agreement to enter into a conspiracy with life, on behalf of both frog and snake, the predator and the prey, in order to come away changed. Kingsolver, B. (1996) *High Tide in Tucson*. NY: Harper-Perennial, 268.

However celebratory these triumphant stories are, there are images that should chill the blood of any teacher of any subject. Alan Bennett could only be successful in school four days a year because art was rarely offered. Randy Schmidt’s description of the graceful dove flying, free, but then folding as the hunter shoots, and John Gill’s beautiful black glass, made from nuclear waste, which (like him) can never be transparent haunt me because they render images of suffering that I would rather not see. Now I cannot ever again enter a school full of children without imagining these artists as children slouching there in the back of the classroom.

Chapter V

Conclusion: Hope and belief

It seems to me that there is too much misery in this world.... Let each man hope and believe what he can. Charles Darwin

I began this project in part to understand the power and importance of creative life for my students. I wanted to better help them to be resilient, to learn, and to love learning. The other part involved hope and a reason to believe, for myself and for them. I needed to know that my compensation was not random luck, but circumstances that aligned themselves in my favor. If circumstances could be controlled, could they be lined up purposely for my child and others'? The artists I interviewed supplied a model of hope that involved action: teach through joy, not through fear; promote authentic successes, and do not be afraid to care passionately about ideas.

I have used my son's experiences to illustrate the extent to which the school experiences of Greg, Michael, Allan, Randy, John, Les and Don, the seven interviewed artists, are relevant even today and why it is essential that all teachers be aware of the vast power they wield to change a life. For all the difficulties that teachers endure, difficulties that may call into question their original reasons for wanting to teach, the children still need guidance to discover and develop their worth. This is not just for the minority who are divergent learners, but for all children.

Excellent teaching: my son's experience

Most who get to know my boy say that they do not worry about him. He is bright, sincerely sweet and very funny. Somehow, he has learned how to deflect others' annoyance with him by utilizing his wit and eagerness to help. This only works well if the adult has a healthy and playful sense of humor. He is exceptionally good at understanding others' feelings, but can be rendered inarticulate and extraordinarily shy if he cannot "read" the person or feels unliked. He still annoys his teachers mostly because of his difficulty organizing his time and possessions.

My son currently reads well above grade level and easily develops fascinations for many subjects, asking endless questions. Currently, he adores science, history and mythology. He is a whiz on the Internet and has memorized all the useful history sites. He does not read fast, but he reads constantly. His spelling and writing are good if he is not tired, but he has difficulty settling down to work. He works poorly in groups and cannot tolerate noise and other distractions, which cause considerable problems in his large class. Open-ended school projects are difficult for him to manage alone because of organizational problems. A year and a half later, I still view his tutor as a lifeline. She has expressed the view on many occasions that despite what the tests indicated, she does not believe that he is dyslexic. Her experience with dyslexic children is that they progress slowly over many years. She also believes that the tests did not scratch the surface of his intelligence, which she believes is part of his difficulty in school. In her opinion, his progress has been too dramatic.

Although I naturally agree that he is bright, I think she underestimates the power of excellent teaching at the right time: my own experience was too similar.

Some people progress in predictable and steady steps, but others make fitful, if rapid, leaps in response to exciting and relevant stimuli. Perhaps most of her students have more serious disabilities or the timing of intervention was not as fortunate. If not for my own experience, I may not have been so quick to search for the right teacher. But it does not really matter to me what she wants to call my son as long as she continues to teach. Peals of laughter leak out of her office into the crowded waiting room. Hopeful parents exchange secret smiles: they know what learning sounds like. My son is writing a story and they are working on different ways to organize his thoughts so that he can put them on paper. His tutor knows about his sense of humor and curiosity, and uses them. This is another point, the tutor knows and likes the boy. And the boy knows and trusts her with his whole being.

The tutor does not see my son in the crowded classroom where his progress, although significant, is more modest. Although coded as a child with a learning disability, he receives no additional support at school and the school's resource (remedial) teacher has only met him because she was required to complete an 'Individualized Education Plan' for him prior to the December report cards. It is perhaps understandable that he receives no special assistance and I no longer fight it. He performs within grade level in all areas and his tutor's help is sufficient. Other children have greater needs.

He continues to annoy his teachers by hiding books and reading when instruction is not sufficiently interesting. Homework sheets are often messy and late because they have been left behind or filed in the wrong notebook. At the other end of his responses, and equally unacceptable to his teachers, when the work interests him he is overly tenacious. Stubborn, he will not be rushed and politely refuses to stick to the time limitations. He does offer alternatives, volunteering to work during lunch or after school in order to finish to his own satisfaction. Finishing projects has become very important to him and he is bewildered by what he thinks are arbitrary rules; he is quick with counter-arguments. Fortunately, the teacher who has known him the longest, and in fact expressed the greatest frustration with him a year ago, is now the one most tolerant of his way of doing things. She also has learned that humor works better with him than punishment and will often tease him into a cooperative mood.

Although no longer aggressive, he does not have many friends at school. His teachers say that he mostly keeps to himself, but does not seem unhappy. This stings me with guilt. I suppose considering what the problems could be, this is a luxury. My son is not very athletic and although he enjoys sports, he is not very coordinated. He is always falling out of trees or crashing his bicycle, and I have become very good at tying pressure bandages and using frozen vegetables to reduce swelling. But he loves to draw, read, be read to, listen to music, play with Lego and take things apart. I know that he would like to be popular and I should be organizing more social activities for him, but I suspect that I won't. Popularity may have to wait.

I will always worry about him, especially when he rides his bicycle. I expect that my mother still worries about me for the same reasons. I am also proud of my boy, proud of the way he is learning to cope. He does not view himself as handicapped, but has noticed that he is different, somehow. He has received good teaching and has responded by making himself available to be taught. He knows about effort, passion for ideas and success. He expects to work hard. And he expects to succeed. He is still very little, only ten, but I believe he can.

What is the relevance of belief?

As discussed in the previous chapter, three themes emerged from the interviews that played a significant part in the artists' eventual compensation for their dyslexia. These involved the manifestation and negative consequences of their learning disability, on the one side. Tilting the scales on the other were good teachers who guided the young artists so that they were well prepared to recognize, and to act on, their recognition of the right fit when they encountered it. This fit was in the ceramic arts, which became life-long passions for each of the artists. What the artists told me, and what they wanted to discuss, was the important motivational value of passionate interest to their willingness to work extremely hard and to persevere through, or around, many obstacles. Like Kohl's (1967) class,

...The children learned to explore and invent, to become obsessed by things that interested them and follow them through libraries and books back into life; they learned to believe in their own curiosity and value the intellectual and literary, ...the quest...(p. 52).

The artists were similarly “obsessed” by a quest. In fact, Alan Bennett said: “I’m so excited about what I’m working on now.... It’s very confusing, and it’s very exciting and I can’t wait to get at it!” (p. 151). This ‘quest’ was also mentioned by the artists as an essential element in maintaining interest in their work. John Gill’s model of the treasure-hunt-teaching method aptly fits the artists’ ongoing explorations into ceramics. Yet probing into the unknown without a map, making it up as you go along, requires substantial reserves of belief, belief in the existence of a treasure and belief in their own resources to find it. This belief was a major ingredient supplied by good teachers and supportive families. Randy Schmidt, who is both dyslexic and an important former teacher of Alan Bennett’s, defined good teaching as “belief” that learners have the strengths to begin such a journey:

...I had someone who believed in me....I guess believing in somebody is just kind of like allowing people to find their own way..., their own tracks.
(p. 196)

What are hope and belief?

Hope is a kindled desire that may or may not be rooted in realistic expectations; it does not necessarily imply action towards the cherished target, but rather a longing for something that one presently lacks. Belief is different because it is rooted in expectations and assumptions about how things *ought* to be, assumptions upon which one is prepared to act. Action is key. Perhaps hope is the fuel for belief. Just as belief probably cannot be established without hope, I suspect that hope cannot be sustained without belief. Theory and practice, the two entangle to form a cord of considerable strength, a force to be

nurtured.

Hope and belief are key to compensation for dyslexia, for fighting off learned helplessness and sustaining the will to try. These are not just pretty words; red of tooth and claw, they are attached to a will to survive. Hope flows when parents and teachers invest energy into knowing the child, discovering how s/he can learn best. Hope grows when strengths are appreciated and valued by the community at large, and when the community bends a little to accommodate individual variations.

The learner, also, must believe, act in his or her own defense. For dyslexics to compensate, it is necessary to question all perceptions, triangulate all data, and have at least one backup plan for every important situation. The dyslexic must learn to operate within the world, as it is. That means recognizing the norms of his or her community without rage or despair. Minimally, the cost is time and effort as the dyslexic learns how to meet those willing to meet him or her halfway. This makes a huge difference whether the dyslexic is trying to catch a bus, make a presentation or synthesize new knowledge about the world.

Indeed, this self-conscious learning can be a very useful habit of mind in fields requiring creativity, empathy and problem-solving.⁸² If there is an advantage to the painful lessons of self-doubt described by the artists, then perhaps it involves honest appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. Imagine a thinking process that, from the earliest age, strives towards sophisticated thinking

⁸²Deborah Meier (1995) recommends "5 habits of mind," (p. 156) which provide a framework for literary criticism: 1. How do you know what you know? 2. What's your evidence? 3. How and where does what you know fit? 4. Could things have been different? 5. Who cares?

by devising strategies to understand where each particle of knowledge fits within a pattern, using the senses to check and double-check, and developing metaphors that transform perception into images and imaginative connections to the real world. Assumptions must always be doubted and double-checked because experience clearly teaches those who learn “differently” that individuals’ perspectives are limited. Learners who have experienced authentic success *because* they approach problems with energy, excitement and intellectual flexibility are a valuable asset. Those capable of intense fascinations, who are compelled to slow down the judgment step in order to question the obvious and doubt assumptions, can make huge contributions. Couple that with an adult’s knowledge, wisdom, capacity for sustained effort, and tolerance for ambiguity.

If not crippled by unfair and painful experiences, but rather encouraged by extraordinary kindness and thoughtful help, a learner may emerge with a determination to promote justice, and empathy for the underdog. An identity that crystallizes around a strong sense of difference from peers, and the courage to work within that difference, is a potential leader in many fields. However it all hinges on the hope and belief from both the teacher and learner. Without the desire for something better, without the imperative to find and hone strengths, without experiences of authentic success, the situation could turn very nasty indeed. I become nervous whenever people discuss the ennobling effects of suffering, but the artists did not mean to suggest unrelieved suffering is beneficial. Their suffering was relieved by the people and circumstances that gave them hope for the future.

Authentic Success:

For a variety of reasons, the ages of 7 or 8 and again around 12 or 13, are crucial years for dyslexics.⁸³ Hence the very strongest, most passionate and emotionally mature teachers are essential for those grade years. If literacy problems were seriously addressed prior to the third grade, some of the opportunity for trauma could be avoided. A large part of addressing literacy problems involves high interest reading material. The learner must desperately want access to the contents of the texts. For those whose disability does not affect their ability to reason, there should be no diminishing of conceptual challenges. Currently in Quebec, the “best” students are sifted into “enriched” programs where they learn French and English by reading and discussing the contents of the most beautiful and accomplished writers that the languages offer. Is it sensible to expect people who work harder to read to maintain the necessary effort if the rewards of decoding the text is dull, simplistic and lifeless? People are hooked on learning if their curiosity is aroused, but become listless when bored. For young teenagers, especially, it is absolutely essential that they find and address their unique strengths while stretching their limitations. This

⁸³Geschwind (1987) and Geschwind and Galaburda (1987) say that the onset of adolescence, about age 12 or 13, is a very important time for maturation of key cognitive functions, particularly those associated with the right hemisphere and concept formation. The curriculum shift in the third grade is problematic for dyslexics because typical weaknesses are suddenly very important.

means that their strengths must be both respected and challenged.

Authentic success is not a trivial matter, not a condescending, “*That’s nice, dear*” situation. Authentic success is accomplishment, proficiency of skill that is on a par with the best. No consideration is made for intentions nor starting point, only the completed task. It does not occur overnight, but is a gradual and determined gathering, consumption, practice, mastery of a block of knowledge. It must be of value and importance to the learner, and therefore it must be real, genuine. For this reason, instruction must not be trivial, nor trivialized.

Art programs must offer real challenges and opportunities for actual success. That means well-trained art teachers, who love and are knowledgeable about their field. The artists I interviewed described the ceramics studio as a relief. Mentored by experts, who were themselves excited about their field, the young artists gradually built up a store of relevant knowledge and skill. The praise of their mentors was more highly cherished because it came from a source they trusted. The student-artists found that effort paid off; they could be themselves and this was good enough. Sadly, for most dyslexics, trauma goes with the territory. All the artists I interviewed had suffered considerably because of their dyslexia, but they felt safe in the clay studio. Being liked and appreciated makes it safer to invest the effort needed to succeed.

Ceramics was the right fit for these learners because their strengths were valued, their weaknesses accommodated and strengthened by good and intellectually “playful” teachers who loved them as learners. The habits of learning that were natural to them were acceptable, and even encouraged. Just

as clay in the right consistency does not require great strength to manipulate, yet works the muscles that will build strength gradually, the right learning environment gradually builds sophisticated thinking. Growing proficiency in their skills increased their thirst for more knowledge, which could only be satisfied with research, in the studio and in the library. Each type of research reinforced the other. Not all of the artists are currently strongly, textually literate, but they are all highly trained researchers. They know how to learn in their medium and they know how to combine knowledge from several sources to form new ideas. This, too, is a type of literacy.

Narratives:

From this place of safety in the clay studio, the artists constructed their own stories in their artwork. Narratives were mentioned over and over as part of their entertainment, intellectual interests and their artwork. In their artwork, their experiences were explored, combined and sequenced in the play-work *giuoco-*ian sense as a method to learn. Different combinations and juxtapositions of ideas rendered their experiences comprehensible, and this comprehension was healing. Even experiences and possibilities that never existed in reality were explored through the art narratives. This is not necessarily art as therapy; it is therapy through accomplishment.

I believe that narratives employed in the presentation of material can be an important hook for learning via the imagination. The artists were visual learners; that is, they needed to get “a picture in their minds” in order to understand. I think that the narratives they loved functioned in this way. The

narratives illustrated a concept or sequence of concepts. This kind of lively play in learning can help establish a passion for learning that will survive disappointment, strengthening the will for a sustained effort.

Children learn most when engaging in activities that are both concrete and playful. Learning activities for young children offered in the context of play, should be concrete, real and meaningful to the lives and needs of children....Self awareness and self-esteem can be enhanced by focusing on the self in art-related experiences (Colbert, 1998, 36).

Narrative play-work often begins with 'What if?' 'What if the princess disobeyed her father? What would happen if this yellow nestled into that green? What if the flower were bent?' These are explorations into the way things work. Like a metaphor, they suggest relationships, juxtapose ideas that may not usually be associated in order to discover new meanings.

In art, "what if?" is not an uncommon question, but perhaps this may also be a hook for other fields. According to Patrick Finn (1999), the playing with possibilities as represented by 'What if? questions is an essential ingredient in the teaching of "powerful literacy," another name for Chall's 5th, and highest, stage of literacy. Finn argues that children learn to become citizens who read, gain knowledge and take action accordingly by this kind of constant practice of consideration of alternate narratives.⁸⁴ For these seven artists, the ceramics work represented a situation where alternate realities could be pursued in a medium tolerant of learning differences; wonder and excitement in learning were, thus, sustained.

⁸⁴Similarly Deborah Meier (1995) "5 habits of mind" (p. 156) provide a framework for manipulating ideas and playing with possibilities.

Curse or gift?

In an article entitled “Neuro-Narratives”, Harvey Blume refers to “our culture’s hunger for varieties of victimhood” (Blume, 2000, p. 44), a singularly cutting reference to the current popularity of cognitive disabilities and biological explanations for behavior. There may be a certain justice to this. Popular wisdom envisions learning disabilities as either a special gift or a curse, nothing in between. However lovely an allegory this may be “in between,” however unsatisfying, is probably closer to the truth. A more balanced view that everyone has strengths and weaknesses is not as provocative and probably will never rally the troops to arms.

Yet rallied troops are required. Real damage is inflicted on children when pedagogical dilemmas are decided on the basis of what is easy, efficient and economical. Hopeless, frustrated and demoralized children often become equally crippled adults. All people are unique and deserve to be appreciated, encouraged in their strengths and strengthened in their weaknesses. Hard on the fiscal budget, in the long run it is considerably cheaper than the alternative. Unattended, little problems grow into big ones.

What this means is that teachers must be knowledgeable, supported, encouraged, respected and well-paid. Class sizes should be small enough so that all children are given the attention they need. All children should receive screening for learning disabilities with their sight and hearing checks before entering kindergarten. And if disabilities are suspected, they should be

investigated. These children should receive support appropriate to their needs before the cycle of failure can take hold.

Attempts have been made to teacher-proof curriculum. I have seen excellent lesson plans and superb curriculum guidelines, but none of them can survive bad teaching or administration. There is no fool-proof way to address the problems of young dyslexics, and there is no fool-proof curriculum. One strategy works with one child, but not with another. The tried and true, while a good place to start, is not always what works. It is essential not to repeat methods that fail. Sometimes what works best is starting at the other end: a deep questioning of the ultimate objectives of the particular teaching and learning situation, coupled with an equally deep understanding of the learner.

As illustrated by the experiences of Don Bunger (see Appendix III) who taught English literature to John Gill, sometimes it is necessary to address weaknesses indirectly through strengths. Don Bunger did not address John Gill's literacy directly. He did ultimately teach an appreciation for literature, but not through reading. This student who had been so thoroughly demoralized from previous experiences did not need yet another experience of failure. By allowing John Gill to "take notes" and respond to literature through his artwork, this teacher helped him to approach literature with intellectual sophistication. To this day, John Gill probably does not enjoy reading, but he does love Shakespeare, Beowulf and the play of beautiful words and ideas. Don Bunger believes that the burden is on the teacher to try to teach all of the students, not just the ones who appear easy to teach. It takes vast resources of energy, thoughtful strategies,

patience, empathy and imagination. Even so as Don Bunger poignantly recalls, some learners slip through the cracks. Fool-proof is not an option; maybe our energies should be diverted into training and supporting teachers like Don Bunger, who are playful, empathetic and thoughtful of the values they wish to instill.

Implications for further research:

The implications for further research I can imagine stem from the many questions left unanswered by this project. I believe that it is essential to find out where the other canaries are and how they are doing. A similar project that focuses on the experiences of minorities and women, and one that expressly deals with the experiences of urban dyslexics is needed. The experiences of dyslexics in other cultures was also not explored. I am particularly curious now that I've read what Kohl (1984) wrote about play-work and playful teaching to know if this concept makes a particular difference in other cultures. Since dyslexia is an interaction between the biology of the brain, the culture in which the individual lives and the teaching of reading, may make a significant difference. It has been speculated that Italian youngsters are less likely to develop dyslexia because of the phonological structure of the language (Goswami, 1997; Snowling & Nation, 1996). However, a great cultural appreciation of the learning methods thought useful for dyslexic learners, that is playful learning or 'giuoco', may also be a significant factor.

I could also see that a project that did a better job defining the exact nature of the subjects' particular learning disability (or disabilities) would be useful to establishing a link between a successful career in the arts, or the ceramic arts, and dyslexia. Furthermore, a study that combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies would make a wider population of subjects more practical without an unacceptable sacrifice of individual fingerprints, thus the

conclusions may be more appropriately generalizable.

Although I cannot imagine conducting such a study myself, I think that a longitudinal study, using the same story-telling format, that follows dyslexic ceramists over a long period would be very valuable to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues that arise and the crossroads pondered, as they are encountered. It is one thing to record stories from the warmth and safety of a successful studio; it is quite another to remain uninvolved as a person's future hangs in the balance. The information collected in such a study would, I think, be very important, but I also believe that it would be essential that the ethics and humanity of such a study be very carefully scrutinized. A potential interviewee for my study felt used by prior experiences with researchers. This woman's response was that researchers have taken, built their careers on her pain, but have given her nothing valuable in return (help with her literacy). This must serve as a grave caution.

Because I would want to repay participants by sharing with them my love of ceramics, I think that my next project will involve a more participant-observational approach. I would like to set up a ceramics teaching situation that puts into practice the good teaching strategies outlined by Kohl (1984) and others. I would like to use this ceramics studio as a laboratory for training art teachers to work with youngsters as though they were all experiencing learning disabilities, and this was their chance to find ways to learn that excite them. To do this, the students in the ceramics classes would be children who have already had experiences of academic failure due to learning disabilities.

Appendix I

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Constant Albertson as part of her doctoral thesis research under the supervision of Dr. David Pariser of the Art Education Department at Concordia University, Montreal, QC Canada.

A. PURPOSE:

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to explore possible relationships between successful compensation for dyslexia and career choice for dyslexic ceramists.

B. PROCEDURES:

As a participant in this research, you will be asked to complete three (3) to four (4), one hour interviews in a place of your choice. For accuracy, I shall need to audio-tape these interviews.

The interviews will explore:

- the nature of your dyslexia, problems and obstacles that it caused in your life and when did you and others discover that you were dyslexic.
- What remediation occurred and with whom? I will ask you to describe specific circumstances and recall stories about your early education, early art experiences, experiences with ceramics, social relationships with peers, parents and teachers, the interrelationships of all of these things.

- I will ask you to describe any current problems stemming from your dyslexia and strategies you use to compensate.
- I shall ask you about your professional involvement in the ceramic arts and in what ways—if at all (positive or negative)-- you think dyslexia affects your career. We will explore your perceptions of the ceramics field and what factors contribute towards your initial and current interest in ceramics.
- In addition, I shall be asking you about your goals, values, interests and current reading, subject matter, facility and comfort.

You will be asked to provide evidence of your dyslexia, which may include formal educational evaluation, teachers' comments on report cards or other documentation that identifies or strongly indicates the nature of your reading disability.

I shall provide you with copies of your interview transcripts and you may make the final decision as to what can be included and what you wish to omit. If you do not wish to be identifiable in this thesis, I shall omit any references that would make identification possible.

I shall provide you with a final copy of the thesis.

C. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences to myself.
 - My consent to participate is on the condition that (circle one)
 - a. I am not identifiable.
 - b. My identity may be revealed.
 - I have the final word about what data from my interview should be omitted in order to prevent my identity from being known.
 - I understand that the data from this study may be published.
 - I understand the purpose of this study and know that there is no hidden motive of which I have not been informed.
-

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

WITNESS SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

Appendix II

Summary Protocol Form for Doctoral Thesis in Art Education

1. Title of Research Project:

“...Because Clay has a Memory”

2. Sample of Persons to be Studied:

Participants in my study will be middle-aged adults who are successful professional ceramic artists and also have compensated for their reading disability, dyslexia.

3. Method of Recruitment of Participants:

Subjects will be solicited from lists I have compiled of volunteers from my presentation on dyslexia and the ceramic arts at the *National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts*, a professional organization of ceramists, and from informal discussions that have occurred during *NCECA* conferences and ceramics workshops I have lead. Subjects will not be paid for their participation in my research.

4. Treatment of Participants in the Course of the Research:

(i) intrusiveness of the research: I shall conduct three to four, one hour interviews with each participant. Subjects will be asked to provide evidence of their reading disability, dyslexia, to describe the nature and effects of their disability, and to describe their compensation strategies. Furthermore, subjects will be asked to recall information concerning their early general educational experiences; social influences and relationships with peers, family and teachers; formal and informal art-making

experiences; how they came to choose ceramics as their profession, their feelings about their profession as it relates to their disability, and the interrelationships of all these factors.

(ii) steps to respect cultural differences: This research does not directly involve issues of cultural differences. There may be aspects of the research that are affected by cultural differences, for example religious holidays, social expectations, preference for meeting place, etc, but these factors will be taken into account as they arise on an individual basis. Research will be conducted with as little discomfort to the subjects as possible.

This research does involve potentially sensitive material. It may be that subjects will recall traumatic or upsetting experiences caused by their dyslexia. I shall protect the confidentiality of subjects whenever necessary. Subjects will have the opportunity to review transcripts, make corrections and clarifications or withdraw information that they would prefer not to include.

Subjects will be informed that they may withdraw from the research at any point.

(iii) payment of subjects: This research is not currently supported by grants or external funding. Subjects will not be paid for their participation and participation is entirely on a voluntary basis.

(iv) privacy and confidentiality: Subjects will provide sensitive or private information. I shall delete any identifying information from the transcripts or supporting documents and ask the subjects to approve these deletions.

If the subject has such a high professional profile that these omissions will significantly impoverish the research, I shall ask participants to allow this information to be included. The final decision to allow information will be given to the subject.

5. Indicate Briefly How the Research Plan Deals with the Following Ethical Concerns:

(a) Informed consent: please see informed consent form attached.

(b) Deception: This research does not include deception of subjects. Subjects will have full knowledge about the nature of the research and how their contributions will be used.

(c) Freedom to discontinue: Participants in the study will be informed on the consent sheet that they may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. In addition, I will discontinue working with a participant if I perceive that participation is causing harm to the subject. Subjects will not be paid for their participation in this research, therefore this cannot be used to persuade reluctant participation.

(d) Risk to subjects: Participants will be asked to recall experiences that may have been traumatic, and this may cause them discomfort. However the final list of participants will be drawn from individuals who are currently

successful in their professional lives, have compensated for their dyslexia, and are mature adults. If the process of discussing with me past traumas is causing new traumas to them, they or I may decide to discontinue the interview, either postponing it or ending their participation.

(e) Post-research explanations: please see attached consent form.

(f) Confidentiality of results: I shall know the identities of participants in my study. Their names and any identifying information shall be deleted from the data unless other arrangements have been made explicitly with the participant.

(g) Protecting participants 'at risk' situations: This research does not involve quantitative measurement or assessments or provocation of potential injury or trauma. This research involves the values, memories and perceptions of the participants and it is unlikely that participants would be in any risk. If subjects become upset by the memory of past experience, the interviews may be terminated.

6. Ethical Concerns:

Many dyslexic people have suffered unfair and harsh treatment at the hands of educational authorities, parents and peers. In addition, psychological trauma commonly occurs as the result of high intelligence and low performance. Although the people I intend to include in my study are 'high functioning' dyslexics, the recalling of past humiliations may be painful, although I do not expect this to inflict new traumas. For this

reason, if I or the participant feels at any time that he or she is under an unacceptable amount of stress due to the interviews, the participant or I may decide to terminate the interviews.

In addition, many dyslexics feel ashamed of their disability and fear that if it became known they would suffer unacceptable consequences. If this is the case, I shall protect the confidentiality of any information given me and provide participants with the opportunity to review transcripts and make modifications. If it is impossible to conceal the identity of participants, they may elect to withdraw or allow the potentially identifying information to remain. The final decision for omissions will remain with the participant.

Appendix III

DON BUNGER

In the late 1960's, Don Bunker began teaching high school English Literature. One of his students, John Gill, was both so intelligent and so disabled by his dyslexia, that he became the challenge that would help shape the way Don Bunker taught all his students for the remainder of his teaching career. At the time, Mr. Bunker was new to teaching and had no experience with dyslexic adolescents. Prior educational experiences for John Gill had included humiliation and beatings. Nonetheless, Don Bunker realized that John Gill's literacy did not diminish his interest and comprehension of ideas. Focusing on the value of instilling a love for literature, Don Bunker read aloud to John Gill and allowed him to 'take notes' in class using lumps of clay instead of pen and paper. Mr. Bunker discovered that John Gill's oral responses in the class discussions were insightful and pertinent if allowances were made so that John was allowed to work in the ways that he could.

Rather than resenting or being contemptuous of John's contributions to the class, classmates admired the beauty of his sculptures and respected his ideas. Because acceptable responses to the assigned readings included sculptures, John Gill could be proud of his contributions. As you will see, this teaching and learning experience was so powerful for both 'teacher' and 'learner' that over thirty years later, both spoke with passion and clarity about what happened and how it informed how they both thought and acted in their professional lives. John Gill partly attributes his life long habit of hashing ideas

around with knowledgeable colleagues to this remarkable and insightful teacher.

Now retired from teaching, Don Bunger and I chatted over the telephone about the nature of this research project, my background and my interest in his teaching. We began with his background and continued to discuss the progression of his ideas about teaching and learning. As you will see, Don Bunger had himself experienced alternative education, a home schooling situation. A favorite professor of his had taught in the Peace Corps and this also was very influential. This preparation seems to have primed him to see John Gill, and similar students, in another light. Essentially, Don Bunger believes that it is the teacher's responsibility to understand the learner and imagine what s/he needs. There can be problems that result from a poor teacher/learner fit, but it is the teacher's burden to accommodate the learner so that the learner does not become crippled. No teacher, however excellent, is always successful with every learner. Don Bunger, also, generously offers a sobering cautionary tale, a fitting balance.

DB: ...I graduated from the University of Oregon in '64. I went on extended courses for two years and I had only been teaching... [two years]...in '68, when...[John Gill was in my class].... It was a class of about 38 in a very tiny room. We were doing senior literature, English literature.

I did have... [an art background], kind of by default. ...I lived in the Middle-East for two years without school, so my mother taught me. ...We would go to Babylon, ...Jericho, ...Jerusalem, ...Egypt, ...Greece, ...Rome and Paris-- [We saw] ...the British Museum. I had all of that before I was thirteen. So we'd study something and then go see it. It was an amazing introduction to art!

But in college I was much more interested in literature....I loved writing, so I ...headed in that direction. I knew John was interested in art and I guess he'd had some difficulties in ...[his earlier schooling]. [But] I had no formal training in dyslexia at the university. ...At that time, there wasn't much of a theory out there. He [sat] in the very front row, I remember, and he was interested in art. So I decided that since... he was having trouble with spelling, ...[and writing]-- I said: "*John, I'm wondering [what] if I read ...you the material after school and you took notes, but [not written notes], ...you'd draw it.*" He was working in clay; so eventually ...he brought clay in and took [his] notes in clay. He'd bring a glob of clay in and the [other students]...would [wonder]. But soon they realized that John was [just] taking notes in clay and they were taking notes in the regular way. (...I was still in my lecture mode; I hadn't figured out group discussions yet, that came after 4 years of teachings...). Suddenly everyone looked at John, who'd walk in [to the classroom] with several art books. He'd be pouring through those as we were doing Beowulf. ...John's assignment was to figure out how to do it from an art standpoint.

...I was a new teacher in a very small room, having great fun teaching. That was not a problem. The kids were interested; I had no problems with control. But I realized that John couldn't keep up...it was not a level playing field.... When I talked to him, sometimes he would pop out with an interpretation of Beowulf or Shakespeare,...or whatever we were working on, and his understanding would-- everyone would say: *"John doesn't read very well. How come he understands it?"*

...I had a teacher in college in education, one of the most profound ones I had, who'd spent time in Canada on an Indian reservation. I probably learned more from him than anyone else; he [taught me that it was important to begin teaching from where people are, not make them conform to you.] So I was open to realizing that one person out of that 38-person class, probably wasn't going to follow the standard regime. He would probably work harder at doing his assignments than they would, because they were in their element.

[John's]... ears seem to be the key to his understanding. I'd read the... [text] to him after school; then we discussed how to make art out of it. So everything in the whole year was John speaks art, everybody else speaks essays or short answers. (I never believed in multiple choice.) ...I just thought that that was what would work. Then he ...[realized] that, "Well maybe I can get literature by having it read to me." [By] going through the ears, he understood it. Then he [was able to discuss]... it.... So I felt that John was working; he was running. Everybody else was at a

brisk walk, from a grade standpoint. I didn't think that he needed to be told: *"...You can't graduate, or you can't get credit, just because you see things differently."*

This was 32 years ago.... I wasn't in New York State; [he] didn't have to have to pass a [competency] test in order to get a diploma. If I'd had that kind of pressure, I would've possibly... [done things] differently.

But I didn't, so we studied about Prometheus. I said: *"Why don't you try Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound?'"* I had all of my college texts right there in the classroom, so I went over to that and I said: *"Well, let's figure out how you would do 'Prometheus Unbound.'"* So I read that to him and he worked on a brass sculpture. He gave it to me a couple of years later.... He was able to translate literature directly into art.... He would hear it [and understand it without the usual writing useful for]... a person who doesn't have dyslexia. ...For John, clay and the wheel is [the equivalent of] a pen and paper. ...As he makes the clay speak to him, that's the draft. When he is finally ready to... [fire it], he's doing fonts... [and layout]. So, ...I wondered why the system wasn't allowing that. ...Working with him and having him be successful and feel like: *"Well finally I can get through high school,"* he was probably the first student who taught me that you don't have to follow strictly the rules that are embedded in your mind....

...The smartest people in the room are often the ones who are most disruptive. That's a generalization that needs to be qualified a little bit.

The ones who are the hardest to get on task, it's because [of an incompatibility with] the learning style of the teacher. If the teacher is a *concrete sequential* and the dyslexic is an *abstract random*-- whoa, we've got a serious problem! The abstract random vs the concrete sequential, then you add dyslexia in there and a lack of ability to read..., [it's an opportunity, really, for art saving the day], ...if the art is done correctly and the teacher is relaxed, even if s/he's a concrete sequential. The teacher has to get out of his or her comfort zone and ...learning style. S/he is going to say: "*This isn't comfortable for me, but this person wants to do it differently and that's [the learner's] style.*"

So, I think that the teacher has to do amazing shifts. I did a Bay Area writing project in '88, which you may have heard about in San Francisco; they had the same version here in Seattle. I did an hour's presentation to all the teachers about what it's like to be an abstract-random; most of those teachers in the class were absolutely not abstract-randoms! The classroom had both fluorescent lights and incandescent bulbs. So I was fiddling with those as I started my lecture, which caused some of them to go completely out of their chairs because I was doing what one of their students would do... [Those students would be looking for a way to make themselves more comfortable and the teachers would assume they were being intentionally disruptive]. After I'd talked for an hour, and lost most of them..., [the teachers in the audience] said: "*Now, I understand why I can't relate to some people.*" [If I were one of their

students], I'd say: *"...I don't see things the way you see them; yet I'm in your classroom."* I think it's a golden opportunity to stretch beyond whatever they've been taught, to allow ...[different kinds of learners] to blossom, giving them the freedom to create.

John needed ...to do clay and in his ...discussions with me, he'd often be the only one who understood the concepts. This was good for him, and it allowed me to allow him [be successful]. I couldn't grade him the same way and everybody else understood. I think there was a sense that, *"Okay, he's taking notes in clay, I can't do that."* ...When I'd ask him what his notes meant, he would completely floor the 'writing' people. They'd shake their heads and say: *"Oh, he's on a different plane than I am."* So I didn't have any problems with people saying: *"How come John doesn't have to write?"* They knew that John could do something that they couldn't do. So I guess you're talking about a two-track system, but I don't like the word 'track'.... It is two different ways to arrive at the same place. ...I'm supposed to teach; you're supposed to learn. We're headed in that direction and some of you have some rather bizarre ways of getting there. In the end, that's what really counts.

About two years after John graduated, we had the option of changing curriculum, which was revolutionary because I was [then] able to teach Science Fiction... We created the courses over the summer and bought the books. ...I bought thirty distributor caps at a junk yard, complete with wires. I cleaned them all up, put them in front of everybody,

and said: *"Okay, this is the process of writing."* One of the teachers, she was a math teacher but also a counselor ...came in for two days ...and just stood there. [She] ...could not understand why the whole class was talking about ...distributor caps.... *"This is the input, this is how it works and you take the wire and you connect it here and you have the bottom of the distributor cap that is connected..."* When you think about it, the input and the output are the cause and effect.... Everybody was getting excited about distributor caps. [We were even on] ... local district TV.... ...Now, [this math teacher]... could not understand because she was concrete-sequential... The kids were just absolutely having fun with it, playing with the metaphor.... And writing improved!

... One of my students was at NASA and he picked up slides of the space habitat and ...so we built O'Neill's space colony, the only one in existence that rotated. It had a day and night cycle. It was made out of a hot water tank, and we used Baskins & Robbins ice cream boxes to build the models.

So, everything I did after John [was in my class] had to do with [experiential learning]. You had to have [the opportunity] ...to fiddle with something, if that was your style. Now if it wasn't your style, you didn't do it.... To summarize, I think that you have to allow students to create. But this is the hard part: if the curriculum requires students to turn in something and the dyslexics don't turn it in, but they do something else, maybe that's all right.

I had another student who never followed the rules and took all the classes that I taught. He always wanted to go beyond the rules and I gave him a "D". Now he works for Microsoft and every time I see him he says: *"How come you gave me all those "D"s?"* You see with him, I wasn't consistent. Was he dyslexic? I don't think so; maybe he was. We don't always catch these kids and we don't always have success. You might have success with one, or with 150 others you see in a day, but somebody else slips through the cracks. I didn't make the connection with him that I did with John. So I think the thing you've got to stress is that... [the learning style of the teacher sometimes blinds him or her to the needs and talents of the students]...

Well, it seems to me that the learning style theory, which came in the '70s and '80s-- the left and right hemispheres.... [This] really was to me the window and the justification for doing things the way I was.... I felt that this was the justification for having multiple assignments coming in. If I knew the kids, I could ...have several different outcomes or objectives in a class, and that would be acceptable. So, I think ...[the teacher's] task is [to figure out how to] allow different kinds of assignments to come in... [depending on the needs of the learners]. It puts a real burden on the teacher to be able to accept and somehow grade the material... [submitted].

I think the layout of the classroom, the seats and of course the walls, have to be covered with all kinds of posters and paper and models

and.... My classroom was a fire hazard for years and the principal was upset about it for about seventeen years until he finally came around and said: *"You know, I think every classroom needs to look like this."* ...You could just read the room.... I had one wall with very little for the people who don't like that. It puts an awful lot of burden on the teacher [to teach everyone]....

John's mother invited my wife and me to visit John and his family. ...We had a great time ...and I thought: *"Wow, he's lived with this all of his life and he's a full professor! Look what he has done-- look how far he has gone."* I think if you were to take the successes that you've interviewed and say: *"Look, I've interviewed x number of people. They are at the top of their careers and they are dyslexic. Now why is it that I wasn't able to interview twice or three times as many, and why couldn't I not have made my whole project much larger?"* ...Part of the burden [of the lack of numbers] is teachers' perceptions of the disability.

One of my former students ...got a scholarship to M.I.T. He was in the distributor cap group, when I first did that, must be about 1975. He wrote me from M.I.T. that [he had taken the advanced placement exams and was exempted from the first year mathematics courses]. *"I thought of the distributor cap as I took the test and I said: 'Well, we have input, we have output, we have different values on each cylinders.'* And I was the first in the history of M.I.T. not to have to take this class; so thank you for doing the distributor cap." I've always wondered how do you ...freeze-

**frame methods that work when most of the peers with whom you are
teaching can't understand how you operate?**

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