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When theory meets practice: Bringing authentic material to the clay classroom

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Abstract

Within the Ghanaian clay and artistic discourse, traditional practice and formal academia training have been windows for producing ceramic works. However, despite their contributions to the cultural heritage of Ghana and beyond, they seem to be on a parallel practice, with limited synergies and inclusiveness. This study, therefore, looks at what the two seemingly disparate extremes, albeit bound by a common material, "clay", can learn from each other. To what means would the notion of collaborations become a strong tool for strengthening the traditional and contemporary practice and getting younger practitioners to take over from the ones that are ageing? The study discussed the possibilities of traditional pottery practices and academia collaborations and the effect on expanding the clay material and artistic productions. In sum, and their exchange of knowledge with students foster creativity and a healthy relationship between academia and traditional practice. Artistic and curatorial practices can thrive better by identifying and developing such synergies. Both students and women potters moved from knowing to understanding clay practices.

Keywords

Ceramics, traditional potters, collaboration, academic practice, classroom

1. Introduction

In this paper, we looked at what will transpire when traditional women potters (referred in this study as authentic material) of adult age are brought to the university classroom to interact with students and to learn from each other the making of clay works. It is based on the premise of what John Dewey (1934; 1938) postulated that when students of different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomics, genders, and ages are brought together collectively, it has a positive powerful potential to support the social and academic development of both groups. Generally, time spent in the classroom must translate directly into real-world activity where students after a class must be able to diagnose, decide, and act (Smith, 2003; Garvin, 2003) and bringing these experienced potters and students together served as a vehicle to understanding their common material which is clay and then fostering of relationship through exchange of knowledge and skills.

Currently, ceramic students at the Ceramic Section of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana, are trained on a 4year curriculum programme. Their training is a conglomeration of theory and practice. Within the traditional industry practice, their training has been through formal apprenticeship and one of the oldest professions in Ghana and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Clay has been the major raw material for traditional ceramic production and is readily available in huge quantities in almost every region in Ghana and clay practice is seen in almost part of Ghana (Kesse, 1995; Amoanyi et al., 2012). Over the years, these traditional potters (largely women-centric practice), have acquired the skills and dexterity to manipulate clay in any form. They manipulate the clay to form vessels which they use in preparing and serving food, storing grains, fetching and storing water. These vessels play a quintessential role in the domestic aspects of every home in Ghana. Due to this vital role of making pottery for everyday use, the potters (mostly women) have become key thinkers and practitioners in the making of pottery. Nevertheless, these potters have been marginalised within both traditional and contemporary spaces and their practice is gradually becoming unattractive to the youth. As artists and art educators, though there has been some level of collaboration within these authentic materials and academia especially in the areas of field trips by students to traditional pottery working centres, we have not done well in sharing in their experiences to sustain their practice. They have a long history of preserving our cultural heritage and significance.

According to Schumacher (1973), the contemporary significance of the survival of such rural crafts is twofold: first, they provide interesting examples of the practice of traditional techniques, techniques which may be gradually disappearing as industrialisation proceed. Secondly, it is this small-scale industry that the Ghanaian government and, incidentally, many African governments have to develop as an employment viable sector (Stewart, 1978). It is distressing to note that within the employment statistics of Ghana, the ceramic industry in Ghana has consistently been recording higher quitting rates than increased numbers of new entrants (Nortey et al., 2019). With the advance of technology and industrialisation, mass production which obviously make these products cheaper than the handmade ceramic wares produced by these potters and their demand for the mass products is higher than the handmade ones (Nortey et al, 2017). Coupled with the influx of ceramic and non-ceramic products from Asia and the Western world, Ghanaian traditional pottery practice and profession are facing challenges of thriving and therefore becomes expedient to address this challenge if only as artists, educators and practitioners, we desire sustenance of this indispensable traditional clay practice. Similarly, within the academic space of studying ceramics in Ghana, there is the marginalisation of women in ceramics in terms of employment, exhibition, and residencies and are very outnumbered during ceramic workshops and symposia (Nortey, 2022). It appears the voices of Ghanaian ceramic women have not made the needed connections and provocations whenever Ghanaian ceramics is being discussed.

Examining the two scenarios of waning interesting Ghanaian traditional ceramics and women in academia brings to bear the expediency of collaboration as proposed by the Nortey (2022) model for academia-industry collaboration. In that model, Nortey (2022) calls for collaborations between academia and industry in a knowledge and skills exchange. According to Davis (2017), the challenges such as a gap between academia and industry we have today require a push for collaboration because they are too big to be solved alone and they require complex teams. Significantly, art and design-based collaborations with the community have become high-profile examples within academic institutions to showcase outreach and a commitment to civic engagement (Lane & Tegtmeyer, 2020).

This study is interested in what happens when experienced potters meet with students of clay. It looks at a synergy between traditional women in pottery and ceramics students of academia. The study sought to closely examine the possibility of the cross-fertilisation of academia and traditional/indigenous

ceramic practice. When one considers the wares that are produced by indigenous women potters and clay workers, what would one make of them? To what extent are these works "art", "crafts", "installations" or "commercial products"? How can traditional/ indigenous potters become authentic and viable material in the university classroom? What would be the response from ceramic students in university when these potters become their 'professors'? What potential lies in the shaking up of the academic space in this manner? What can the two seemingly disparate extremes, albeit bound by a common material, "clay", learn from each other? To what means would the notion of joint exhibitions become a strong tool for reviving the traditional practice and getting younger practitioners to take over from the ones that are ageing? This study attempts to find answers to the afore-stated questions.

2. Framework

The framework for this study was based on the Nortey (2022) academia-industry model. In the model, there are three structural pillars; Industry-Academia Collaboration, Ceramic Women in Industry and Personal Development. This study was anchored on the industry-academia collaboration where students and those in the industry can exchange skills and knowledge in both working environments. The model is built on the findings to addressing the challenges within the practice of ceramics both in academia and the industry. The framework was further strengthened by the fact that students would benefit greatly if there is a sort of periodic exchanges with what happens in the industry. McDonald (2004) posited that the classroom environment differs from the workshop/ industry environment because it has a more leisured approach to learning the craft. Again, in our current technological practice, the need for a synergy is imperative in order to share knowledge and skills. Dawson emphasised the need to share knowledge and process in the context of radical thinking and 'working together' for the greater good of both students and traditional potters (p. 16).

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design, Population and Sampling

Providing students with the experience of working with communities is challenging (Lane & Tegtmeyer, 2020). The research design was a human-centred type under the qualitative approach to bring both traditional women potters and students together. Though we designed our methodology based on this human-centered approach, we used the Nortey (2022) academia-industry

model. The population for the study was ceramics students at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and traditional potters (herein referred to as authentic material). Purposive sampling was used in selecting first year ceramic students who had registered for 2 credit hour course titled Traditional Ghanaian Pottery. The simple random approached enable the study to gather 35 out of 38 students. With regards to the traditional potters, 8 traditional potters working at the Afari Pottery centre in the Ashanti region were purposively sampled. The have had over 40years working experience. The simple random technique was used to select 3 traditional potters for this synergy. Looking at the disparity between these experienced traditional potters and the students, there was the need for someone to play the role of a coordinator. We, therefore, served as a *bridge* because we gained the trust and the confidence of these traditional potters whom we have worked with for over 10 years as well as the students whom we have been teaching.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

We had previously collaborated with them on design thinking, innovations and how they can improve the value of their wares whilst maintaining cultural consciousness (Nortey & Bodjawah, 2018). The model urges a cross-fertilisation of academia and industry in a careful interplay of workshops, training, skills and product development. First, we created the rapport with these traditional potters and appreciated them as makers of ceramics through periodic visits, dialogues and series of workshops. Secondly, as one of the authors is a course instructor for Ghanaian Traditional and Contemporary Ceramics (CEA 161) under the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Ceramics programme, there is this periodic industrial trip to the working sites of these traditional women potters. These trips make them unofficial students of these traditional potters. In order to foster stronger collaborations, it was imperative to also bring these potters to the university classroom to have an interaction with the students outside their working environment. Both students and the traditional potters were made aware of this arrangement and that particular interaction was labelled "When theory meets Practice: Bringing authentic material to the classroom". This arrangement afforded both parties to become conversant with each other's working environment. Data was analysed based on the interactions that took place between the two using the heuristic and narrative approach.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 When Theory Meets Practice

There is a challenge of how to enhance and intensify connections between theory and practice (Wallis, 2020; Orland-Barak and Yinon, 2007). Darling-Hammond (2006) also reiterated that one of the perennial dilemmas of teacher education is how to integrate theoretically based knowledge that has traditionally been taught in university classroom with experienced based knowledge from field practice. This study purports that one sure way of intensifying this connection is a creation of a classroom where practice and theory can have an interaction. It cannot be over-emphasised that these traditional potters form of experience with the clay has been very rich with practical understanding of the clay material they use. Whilst the students go through their study for 4years before graduation, these potters learn through apprenticeship and have mastered the practice for at least 40years. All of these potters learnt their skills from their maternal lineage and this has been handed down from generation to generation. Through interaction, the study recorded that these potters know the clay material that they manipulate and work with but what they do not know is the mineralogical composition of the material and what accounts for the various transformations when the clay goes through firing. They, again, do not have a scientific way to regulate the firing temperature of their firewood kilns other than using a spy hole to observe change in colour as a way of ascertaining the maturing temperature of the wares. Students on the other side have the opportunity of knowing the clay and its mineralogical compositions through the use of X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) equipment and other technological means. Through this technology of examining the clay material, students get to understand 'what' influences 'what' to have changes in the clay material.

As these traditional potters and students began to interact to know each other more, an internalized knowledge was transferred from both ends. Though traditional potters were brought to the KNUST Ceramics Classroom to demonstrate the making of earthenware bowls and transmit skills, one could see their interaction and questions were on the characteristics of the clay and what accounts for the clay behaviour. This increased the self-image and confidence from both sides. Bandura (1995) posited that once participants in a group project gain a sense of power and confidence in the classroom, they can also develop a generalised feeling of self-efficacy.

When practice meets theory, it provides answers to the gaps in classroom learning as well as explanations in practice. What the study observed was a fill-in of the knowledge gaps from both ends. According to Hanny, et al (2017) when there is a synergy between academia and industry, it addresses the contrary discourses necessary for authentic engagement and sustainable change.

To what extent are the works of the traditional potters "art", "crafts", "installations" or "commercial products"?

One of the many contentions that have been discussed under ceramics is whether to classify traditional pottery under art objects or craft. Judith (2017) contented that the debated about whether ceramics is art is futile since clay is already present in museums and galleries, and art is defined by material, format and treatment of subject so ceramics is not, by its nature, excluded (p. 4). Under this heading, we do not attempt to differentiate what is art and craft neither if the products from these traditional potters should be considered as art or craft or commercial products. Risatti (2007) looked at art and craft as both objects and concepts. The writer questioned from a theoretical point of view whether craft share the same theoretical basis for art objects? Are the field of craft and art, in some real and meaningful way, actually the same? Without knowing the answers to such questions, how can one relate craft to art, much less make a claim they should be viewed as members of the same class of objects. In this section, the study argues how the pottery products of these craft women can be recontextualised and repurposed in an engaging work of art. Nortey's (2022) *Building Bridges* installation repurposed earthenware bowls and pots, as observed in Figure 1a. Inspired by pottery cemeteries and indigenous pottery wares, Nortey metaphorically shows how these crafts from the indigenous potters can be useful in building bridges that connect a particular community, the makers and users of their products (Figure 1). In the use of these crafts from the potters as an installation, we transform these crafts as art through the interpolation of the principles and elements of design. The installation on Figure 1 therefore, appeals or engages the thinking of the viewer. This means artists can either recontextualise these crafts or deconstruct these crafts in their installations. These are extents to which a collaboration can strengthen what we practice in both the traditional and the contemporary spaces. When such collaborations are strengthened, crafts are transformed into art and the various installations increase the commerciality of their works just as galleries do quote prices for artworks in a museum or exhibition.

Without a gallery or designated space to exhibit their works in Ghana, these potters have an artistic way of arranging or installing their wares at the roadside to attract customers. The roadside in a dusty state becomes their gallery and exhibition space. Without curatorial training and exhibition experiences, their installations at the roadside for viewing and commercial purpose can be likened to because these earthenware bowls are inspired by human relations and their social context. The way and manner in which these potters display their products foster a relationship between the viewer and the potters and that the earthenware bowls are not only to be seen by the passerby but also to appeal to them to buy.

Figure 1: Nortey, S. (2022). Building Bridges, Clay, Variables, KNUST Ceramic Gallery (Photo Credit: Caleb Mensah, 2022).

Figure. 2: Agyemang, K. (2022) Apotoyowaa, Clay, wood, varied, Building Bridges Exhibition (Photo Credit: Caleb Mensah, 2022).

What would be the response from ceramic students in KNUST university when these traditional potters become their 'professors'?

The responses of students had interesting results. The study observed an early attendance of almost all the students to class to welcome the potters which largely had never been the case. Generally, this falls within the general cultural expectations of Ghanaians where the host should be in early to welcome the guest. It was interesting to note that whilst we were expecting some nervousness from the traditional potters and also from the students, we rather observed a relaxed atmosphere free of tension. Both interacted in an informal academic format interspersed with laughter. An interesting classroom ensued and this facilitated understanding and participation.

The study was very much aware that these traditional potters do not have the pedagogical experience to teach a university class. However, we as facilitators had no doubt that they have the capacity to transmit knowledge. A more challenging issue was language barrier (local language versus the English language) how these traditional women would be able to effectively communicate to the university students since they do not speak English to an appreciable level. Kindly follow the link https://drive.google.com/file/d/10FLw-

R6ShJpIuTNFHQWHgH-MKP1ur6_Y/view?usp=sharing. The link shows a brief video of this synergy.

The study also had in mind that even though the local dialect (for instance Twi) could be used, the class was made up of students with diverse language backgrounds and even the case of international students (We had international students from Nigeria, Cote d' Ivoire, and Cameroun). A student offered to be an interpreter and though this was much helpful, we, however, realised the power of language in the manipulation of clay. The interaction between these traditional potters and the students were aided by a "common language" and that language was "clay". The class revealed that there is a poetic language in the manipulation of clay which goes beyond just talking. Students were fully engaged and followed every step from these 'authentic materials' without any interpreter.

The responses from the students were very affirmative. It was observed that a very engaging class and both were interested in finding answers to expanding their clay touch and manipulation. Students were able to process what had been taught and synthesised these theories in examining what these traditional potters produced. Again, the response from the students were that of inquisitiveness since they wanted to know more about the production of earthenware bowls.

What we realised was a higher scoring index of my students in the course which had significant relationship to this synergy between traditional practice and academia that the student had during the semester. In previous examinations, where few students who trailed the course, for that semester there was at least no trails for these students who had interactions with these "authentic materials".

What can these two seemingly disparate extremes, albeit bound by a common material, "clay" learn from each other?

Interestingly, whilst the study assumed that there would be transfer of skills and whilst this was so, both acknowledged that they moved from just knowing the clay to understanding of the clay material. This finding confirms Vygotsky's theory (1986) which states that students learn best when their learning process is connected to existing understanding. Before this classroom synergy, there were numerous educational trips arranged for students to visit these traditional pottery centres provided great background of knowledge for the students. However, this time, it was the reverse and potters had taken the position of

student visitors. Just as they had their works on their studio shelves and most on commercial display, students also had works that had been mounted for critique and assessment. Students works were mostly finished using manganese to give an archaic look, some were painted or draped with fabric and only a few were glazed which the student considers as expensive. Within the traditional setting, wares are left unglazed. This opened an interesting conversation between the students and these traditional potters. Traditional potters keenly asked questions such as how do students prepare their glazes? Where do they collect their manganese from and how do they apply them to their wares? The discussions led to a fact that students collect materials such as feldspar from Moree in the central region, silica from Atoabo, kaolin from Teleko Bokasso, manganese from Tarkwa Mines, all in the Western region for their works. For clay material, they are mostly from Afari and Mfensi townships in the Ashanti region.

Another learning point for these disparate clay groups was on the clay material and going beyond knowing the material to understanding the material. Yes, clay is the most quintessential material for both ceramists in academia and those in the traditional setting of the industry. However, in the traditional setting, it is usually a low-firing clay that is used and this is so because, within the traditional settings, they do not use high-firing kilns but rather resort to improvised kilns that mostly fire below 1000 degrees Celsius. Within the traditional firing settings, the maturing temperature for earthenware is between 650 to 850 degrees Celsius (Nortey et al., 2017; Kesse, 1995).

There was a lot to learn about the common material clay. Within this synergy, different two clays (Mfensi and Afari) was used for the traditional potters and the students to work with. Originally, the traditional potters only work with single clay (the use of one clay in producing works) whilst students generally are allowed to formulate a clay body (the combination of two or more different clays). The academia incorporates feldspar, silica and oxides in their working clay body, the traditional potters only rely on the single clays they collect from the clay site. Within this synergy of cross-fertilisation, both parties got to understand the chemical composition of their clay materials. Just as the traditional potters collect their clay from the river banks of their immediate environment (Afari clay), students at KNUST primarily use Mfensi Clay (a plastic clay collected from a town called Mfensi in the Ashanti region). These two clays have different characteristics and chemical compositions. Mfensi clay is reasonably plastic and when fired to 1100 degrees Celsius turns yellowish brown. Owing to its high refractoriness, it is suitable for earthenware, stoneware, bricks and tile

production (Nsiah, 2007). Afari clay (a clay collected from a town called Afari in the Ashanti region of Ghana) on the other hand is less plastic and when fired to the same temperature turns reddish brown.

What potential lies in the shaking of the Academic Space?

The University academic space has a conglomeration of both theory and practice, though the theory more often than not overweighs the practice, especially in Ghana where the promotion of even faculty members in art practice is tied more to research and publications rather than exhibitions. With the rise of technology, there is a changing ground for art teaching and learning and this has the potential of shaking the academic space. As new ways of learning, especially at the tertiary level where students are trained to fit into industries, academia must begin or strengthen their engagement with those in the industry to bridge the existing gaps in training the requisite manpower for ceramic and allied industries. The academic space, therefore, needs to rely on the experiences of the unacademic space to foster a rich exchange of knowledge. The sense of feeling of being part of University training was something huge for these traditional potters who before then confirmed they asked themselves the question: "Will they let us in to demonstrate what we have?". The traditional potters confirmed their satisfaction with engaging students in learning how to make earthenware bowls and also engage in the discussion on clay. The potential sake up here is the acknowledgement that they can become 'professors' when given the nod. They are 'professors' in what they create and are capable of transmitting knowledge within ceramic practice.

Another potential shake-up should be academic members creating a system of teaching where they liaise with those in the industry for consistent updates and development of current ceramics practices. This keeps up the artistic level of faculty and also enriches the knowledge and practice of artists. Such collaborations create learning space and these practitioners such as the traditional potters in our communities become welcomed when we engage them in knowledge sharing. As artists and art educators, when we go out to invite others to the classroom, there is openness to a variety of learning. And these varieties shake up the very best potentials in our practice by exposing artists and educators to know. Openness leads to greater learning.

To what means would the notion of joint exhibitions become a strong tool for reviving the traditional practice and getting younger practitioners to take over from the ones that are ageing?

Another potential that this collaboration brought was the call for exhibitions. The study worked towards a series of shows with their attendant discursive engagements, as well as formed a trilogy exhibition project that seeks more action on inclusiveness and diversity. This series of exhibitions is scheduled to come off over a period of time running the length of the academic year. The project sought to re-kindle the waning exhibition culture in the department; activate a more vibrant collaborative engagement with, and exchange between the department, alumni and accomplished indigenous practitioners through exhibitions, outreach activities, symposia and workshops. It is particularly aimed at encouraging and highlighting the participation of women ceramic artists from both indigenous and academic leanings in the Ghanaian context. This is to help mitigate the persistent neglect of women in the field as the exhibition seeks to remedy the anomaly by literally and symbolically initiating conversations that traversed any possible gender divides, whether they are perceived or actual. In the first offering of the trilogy, *Building Bridges*, attention was given to intra-disciplinary developments, cross-generational participation and the potential of bridging indigenous and contemporary concerns in ceramic studio and exhibition practices in the Ghanaian scene. In the second leg, *Tiny but Mighty*, the focus turned to vessels and object groups that challenge notions of scale. In this sense, this segment of the exhibition argues that despite their size, the potential for significance is still retained in the smallest of ceramic wares. The third episode, *Women Only*, entirely focuses on the contribution of women to the development of ceramics in Ghana. It is true that indigenous ceramic forming and finishing techniques have largely been the mainstay of women, however, over the years of formal education and training of studio practitioners, it becomes almost impossible to pinpoint women of note when ceramists are counted in Ghana. By delving into the practices of women ceramists from a variety of locations in the rural and urban sphere, an awe-inspiring exhibition unfolds that is placing otherwise obscure names and practices on a public pedestal.

5. Conclusion

When theory and practice meet, there is a great transfer of knowledge. The need for cross-border fertilisation of skills and knowledge is very key to the sustenance and development of a practice such as ceramics. There is more to learn from each other and such an example of a synergy between these traditional potters and

students facilitates skills transfer and learning. Traditional potters were happy to impact knowledge in a different working environment and students are also happy to experience a different approach to acquiring skills and knowledge. Bringing these traditional potters who in this study are classified as authentic materials to teach and exchange knowledge with students, fosters creativity and a healthy relationship between academia and traditional practice. They both moved on from knowing clay to understanding clay. Ghanaian ceramic art and curatorial practice can thrive better by identifying and developing such synergies and when this is done artists and art educators will become more committed to their community and open up to practice within the communities, there will be a rich exchange of knowledge.

Students picked a lot of skills in clay manipulation by following the demonstrations by these traditional potters. It was a new way of learning from a deconstructed formal classroom. As artists and art educators, we need to develop or strengthen a pedagogy that connects theory and practice for better output. This study recommends a teaching pedagogy in art that includes diversity and more inclusiveness of both academia and industrial practitioners. This recommendation will be championed at organized workshops and meetings with educational managers and industrialists.

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Alignment of theoretical framework with research method

Materials & Methods
Appropriateness of research method (research design, sample and sampling technique, instrumentation, data analysis plan)
Ethical issues addressed

Soundness of analysis and interpretation; Conclusions/Recommendations
Clarity and depth of analysis and interpretation
Adequacy of interpretation and analysis
Soundness of conclusions and recommendations

Contribution to the knowledge & practice
Implication(s) to art education
Contribution to practice
Contribution to knowledge

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