Igniting Clay:  
Empowerment through Pottery for Special Needs and Chronically Ill Students

Some cold hard facts about chronic and life-threatening childhood illnesses:

- Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease for children under age 15.
- Each year around 13,500 children are diagnosed with cancer in the US, that’s more than a classroom of kids a day.
- Approximately 27% of U.S. children live with severe health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, cystic fibrosis, cancer, sickle cell, neurological and autoimmune disorders.
- These illnesses affect their daily lives and normal activities, often contribute greatly to school absenteeism and requiring continual medical attention.
- When a child has a chronic or serious illness, in many ways the whole family has the illness—siblings suffer a variety of negative effects, even PTSD-like symptoms, as a result of their brother or sister’s problem.

Many of us have already dealt with a child such as this, and it’s a virtual certainty that if not yet, you will have one or more chronically ill children in your classes during your career.

Time lost from school for hospitalizations and treatment is very difficult for these children to catch up on, and even though home-bound teachers are available, the services vary widely, some states offering as few as 2.5 hours of instruction per week—hardly time for a sick child who’s already behind to excel—or even pass. Very few hospitals have on-site schools, like the one I work at in MD Anderson, where kids with ongoing medical problems can continue their education, and the home-school option many parents choose has the unfortunate side-effect of isolating the child even more. (Some of the kids I see only have friends who are sick or dying—imagine yourself in that situation!)

When these students are able to return to school, they obviously have a number of disadvantages: deficits in academics, socio-emotional difficulties (many times their healthy friends have “moved on” and lost touch, or there’s outright bullying, depending on the disability) and of course the lingering effects of their illness, such as cognitive difficulties, accessibility issues, or general weakness and lack of stamina.

But we have a Super-Power to help these kids, and it’s ART!

How can art, specifically clay work, be cast as such a panacea? Because the very nature of real creativity is autonomy, the assertion of one’s unique self, the “I AM.” For children who have been at the mercy of the medical system for weeks, months or years, this opportunity to CHOOSE for themselves is incredibly powerful.

“The Pot of Gold at the end of the rainbow is the end of childhood cancer.” ~Lisa Sitz, Art Educator
My premise is that while two-dimensional art is a wonderful outlet (and can be profound) the essential qualities of clay—the tactile, malleable, textural fascination of it, provide a unique experience. When a child manhandles a hunk of clay into the shape they desire, they have a visceral sense of accomplishment, control, even power!

If clay work (as art therapist Patricia Sherwood stated in her 2010 book *The Healing Art of Clay Therapy*) is the “Cinderella of art therapies” then the pottery wheel is my magical coach. Even that most skittish type of wildlife, the middle school boy, bored and angry and plugged into his X-Box, can be lured out of his funk with a pottery wheel. Teens to preschoolers respond to the mesmerizing wheel. In order to insure a positive experience, I always center and open the clay first, skipping the tedious step of learning to center. They say they want to make a cup, or a plate, or a football or a donut (!) and by golly, they make it! They get the choice and they get the accomplishment.

Well before my current position as a cancer hospital art teacher, I saw the amazing power of clay with special needs children. A fifth grade student with Tourette’s Syndrome, mainstreamed in a “regular” elementary school where I taught, suffered from severe verbal and physical tics all day. Incredibly, he found a respite from his symptoms with clay. When I did a clay unit with his class, I discovered that when he had his hands in the spinning clay on the pottery wheel, his tics stopped. After we established it wasn’t just a fluke, we made an arrangement for him to come to the art room each day during his lunch period to work on the wheel. Usually he didn’t actually make anything, he just enjoyed handling the clay as it spun.

If you don’t have a wheel available, handbuilt clay can be just as fascinating—IF you have some tricks up your sleeve. Whistles, inflatable pots, animal pots and candelabra are all examples of pottery projects that can entrance your students—special needs or not.

In my work as an art teacher of kids with cancer, I have become passionate about the cause of pediatric cancer research, which is severely underfunded. Developing the Pots of Gold for Childhood Cancer Awareness event is my way of using pottery making for social change.

SO, here’s *How to Do It*:

- First, involve your whole school.
- September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, but the events can take place anytime.
- Pots of Gold is the perfect interdisciplinary project, for example:
  - Social studies classes can examine the effects of cancer on families and society.
  - Economics classes can research the diverse costs of this disease in children.
  - Language arts can delve into literature about and by cancer patients.
- But most importantly for OUR discipline, we can take action through art. Making pots and painting them gold, emblazoned with the cancer ribbon, to fundraise for cancer research.

If you want more information on this or any of these projects, you can check the NAEA app, search Facebook for “Pots of Gold for Childhood Cancer” or email me, Lisa Sitz, at lsitz@mdanderson.org.

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Lesson Plan: Clay Whistles

Objective:

To create a working musical instrument using handbuilt methods of pinch pots and coils, with sculptural additions.

Supplies:

Pottery clay or self-hardening clay (such as Sculpture House Boneware)
Whistle stick, (popsicle stick sanded down on one end into a thin reed-like shape) pencils, paper clips, popsicle sticks and cloth or canvas working surface.
For self-hardening clay projects, acrylic paint is recommended.

Procedure:

1. View and discuss examples of clay whistles of various types and designs.
2. Each student is given a small cube of clay, from which a small (pink eraser sized) piece is broken off and set aside.
3. Roll each cube of clay into a “roundish” ball -not so perfect that the surface dries out.
4. Open a hole in each ball by twisting it onto the thumb (like “screwing on a light bulb”) Using the thumb inside and 4 fingers outside, press the clay to make a pinch pot. Keep the opening of the pot as narrow as possible.
5. Using pinching and squeezing, slowly close the pot completely so that it is a closed globe. Roll on the table to smooth out the ball, making sure there are no openings.
6. Tap the ball on the table to make the bottom side flat, and mash down the front into an “igloo” like shape.
7. Holding the whistle in your hand, flat side up, pierce a hole into the ball near the “igloo door” area, which is the mouthpiece. Make sure the hole is open into the cavity of the whistle. Tilt the pencil to make the hole slanted towards the mouthpiece. Remove the pencil.
8. Using the whistle stick, carefully push it into the mouthpiece until the stick shows through the pencil hole. Use the paper clip to clean off any clay crumbs, as they will interfere with the whistling.
9. Carefully remove the whistle stick and check for clay crumbs. At this point one can gently put lips on the mouthpiece and blow—it should whistle! If not, check for clay crumbs or other obstruction, make sure the edge of the pencil hole is slanted at a sharp angle and thin (this is what splits the air to make a sound) and try again.
10. To add sculptural elements to the whistle, make the additions separately then add on with scoring, being VERY careful not to do anything to change the shape of the mouthpiece or air hole. Whistle should whistle immediately, even still wet.

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Lesson Plan:  Pet Pots

Objective:

To create functional piece of pottery which through sculptural additions becomes an animal portrait.

Supplies:

Pottery clay or self-hardening clay
Pencils, paper clips, popsicle sticks, dental floss, source photos of animals, paper for armature stuffing and cloth or canvas working surface.
For self-hardening clay projects, acrylic paint is recommended.

Procedure:

1. View and discuss photos of animals and students own pets, photos of Pre-Columbian animal pottery and examples of various animal pots.

2. Each student makes sketch of the animal design they have chosen, planning where the functional vessel will be in the design—body, head, etc.

3. The vessel is made using either handbuilt methods or pottery wheel.

4. All the sculptural parts to be added on, such as the head, legs, tail and other features, are formed by hand.

5. Any areas that could be too heavy, such as the head, are hollowed out and filed with paper armature. If using firing clay, be sure there is an opening for air to flow, preventing cracking while firing.

6. The body parts are added, using ample scoring, then smoothed on, leaving no seams. Be sure details like ears and tails are tightly attached.

7. If appropriate, a lid for the vessel can be made. For example, the head of a bird could be the lid, fitted inside the neck of the “body” vessel, or a dog pot could have a blanket or sweater draped over the pot opening as the lid.

8. Dry slowly, covered with a loose piece of plastic, so that sculptural additions dry at the same rate as the vessel.

9. Fire (or let dry, if self-hardening) and paint.

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Lesson Plan:  Tree of Life Candleholders

Objective:

To form a personally meaningful candleholder in the style of the "Tree of Life" candelabras of Mexico using pottery and techniques.

Supplies:

Pottery clay or self-hardening clay
Examples and photos of Tree of Life sculptures
Pencils, paper clips, popsicle sticks, dental floss, source photos of animals and cloth or canvas working surface.
High temp wire or floral wire.
For self-hardening clay projects, acrylic paint is recommended.

Procedure:

1. View and discuss the symbols and structure of Tree of Life candleholders.

2. Each student writes a list of important things in their life, and symbols for those things, then makes sketch of the design they have chosen, planning the size and shape

3. The basic shape of the candleholder vessel is made using either handbuilt methods or pottery wheel.

4. All the sculptural parts to be added on are formed by hand.

5. The additional parts are added, using ample scoring, then smoothed on, leaving no seams. Be sure details that stick out from the surface are tightly attached

6. Any areas that could be too heavy, such as extended arms or very tall sections can be reinforced with high temp wire, for firing clay, or floral wire, for self-hardening clay.

7. Dry slowly, covered with a loose piece of plastic, so that sculptural additions dry at the same rate as the vessel, to avoid cracking.

8. Fire (or let dry, if self-hardening) and paint.

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