**TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: stories of design and craft**

**Season 2 Episode 3 Learning and teaching ceramics with Jane Sawyer**

**Jane Sawyer:** There's this saying, you've got to kill your teachers.

It doesn't mean ‘Chop their head off’. It just means get rid of their influences, their overpowering, dominating influences, which you love and you, you went to them for.

It took me a long, long time to work through my own training.

Because you don't want to be like anyone else anyway, do you?

**Lisa Cahill:** This is Object, a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host, Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre.

In this series, you'll meet people from the most popular craft form - ceramics.

You’ll hear about making handmade pottery on a large scale…

How you teach ceramics. We’ll talk to writers and photographers of ceramics.

And we’ll go behind the scenes with curators and art dealers to hear about collecting.

Jane Sawyer is the founding director of the Slow Clay Centre and is a ceramics teacher and artist.

In this episode, you’ll hear how Jane’s apprenticeship in Japan set her a path of learning. Get advice on teaching with clay and hear a wish list for the future of ceramics education in Australia. What’s on your list?

**Lisa Cahill:** Hi Jane.

**Jane Sawyer:** Hi Lisa. How are you?

**Lisa Cahill:** Very well. Can I start by asking you to describe where you are now?

**Jane Sawyer:** Yes. I'm in my home studio under my house and it's a bright sunny day for a change in Melbourne. And so, I have plenty of light coming in. I've got a view of the garden. But I’m in the middle of a very messy studio.

**Lisa Cahill:** And what can we see in the studio?

**Jane Sawyer:** in the studio you can see work in progress. You can see plenty of buckets and containers. There's far too much plastic in my studio, which I'm very embarrassed about and must do something about.

But plastic buckets of glazes and clay recycling, and of course a radio because I can't live without a radio.

Oh, and books, loads and loads of books. I have my library down here in my studio as well, and a desk for drawing and sketching and things.

**Lisa Cahill:** We're going to talk primarily about teaching and learning ceramics, but first tell me about you, Jane. Do you prefer to be called a potter or a ceramic artist? A craftsperson or an artist?

**Jane Sawyer:** Oh, my goodness. You have started with the million-dollar question, which I cannot even answer because there's just too many categories and I really hate being categorised.

So I'm all of those things, but not one, if that makes any sense.

**Lisa Cahill:** Jane, when did your interest in clay begin? Was it very early in life, a passion, or did it come later via another pathway?

**Jane Sawyer:** I had the normal school experiences, I think. I had a wonderful art teacher. I became very passionate about art, and art history whilst I was still in high school.

And then I did an undergrad degree in art education. So, you could say that it was at university that it really took hold of me. But not as a career. I didn't even know there was such a thing as becoming a potter.

I was just thinking I would become an art teacher. But in third year, I met a potter who was to become my first real teacher in ceramics, Andrew Halford. And he offered me a traineeship in his studio once I finished my degree. And that really took my training to another level.

And then it was sort of a natural conclusion, when you finish your traineeship to try and set you up somewhere else.

And I was so keen to go to Japan by that stage, and Andrew's wife at the time was Japanese and she and Andrew sort of almost were surrogate parents in a way. I would have dinner with them a few times a week. And so, they introduced me to a studio in Japan.

**Lisa Cahill:** So, Jane, was it the experience in Japan that reinforced for you, that you wanted to teach ceramics?

**Jane Sawyer:** No, at that stage, I didn't even want to teach at all.

I think I was still so young and the main reason why I didn't go into art teaching after I finished my undergrad degree was because… well… a) I fell in love with ceramics and wanted to give it a go full time, but b) I didn't have any life experience to speak of.

And I can't imagine teaching without some kind of life experience or some kind of.. I'm not talking about authority because that's not what I mean.

But more just a depth of understanding of who I am; what my work is all about; and how I can enable that in other people.

I got back to Australia quite a few years later and established a studio. And then I really just needed some money to pay the rent because selling ceramics is not a very easy thing to do. So, I had some small classes in my Fitzroy studio in Melbourne just to start off.

And then, it wasn't really a big decision as such. It was more out of necessity.

**Lisa Cahill:** I think that a lot of creative practitioners in all sorts of art forms, find their way into teaching their skill. That seems like a natural part of your professional practice in a way to pass on skills that you've learned.

**Jane Sawyer:** Yes but it came later in my case and not until I felt that I had some skills to pass on. I was very very shy. And it’s almost hard to believe now that I was. Because people who meet me sort of say that I’m full of confidence. Somebody said to me recently when I was giving a talk at the Triennale, “You’re so confident.”

But I had to learn all that. And it didn’t come easily to me.

**Lisa Cahill:** Ah, very interesting.

**Jane Sawyer:** The Japanese experience did really inform and give me confidence because when I did finally come back to Australia all those years later, I discovered that people were not actually aware of the Japanese techniques that I had been learning, and they were very fundamental, basic techniques in Japan.

And so that did give me a little bit of confidence to teach something different and something that I knew was really valuable and I still have that motivation.

**Lisa Cahill:** Hmm absolutely. Can you take us through the techniques that you found were not being taught in Australia, that you began to teach at that time?

**Jane Sawyer:** Yeah, sure. When I say fundamental, they really are fundamental. One of them is just how to wedge the clay or mix the clay in a very organic way.

And in English we call it ‘spiral wedging’. In Japanese ‘momiji’ which refers to the Chrysanthemum flower.

And it's a lovely organic way of moving and rocking into the clay in using your body in a very fluid way. And when that's done well, you can mix a large amount of clay without expending any more energy than you would if you were mixing a small amount of clay.

All of the skills that I learned in Japan were.. they came from the trade of pottery, from production, throwing, production, making by hand over hundreds and hundreds of years.

Another fundamental one is throwing off a mound of clay. So say for example, you're making a hundred pots, instead of mixing up a hundred balls of clay, you would mix up one big mound of clay and you might make ten or twenty little pots from that one mound and cut them off as you go.

That technique is all about fluidity, about rhythm, about production skills without expending too much energy. It's about keeping your body upright, your back straight, your wrists, you know, aligned. And there's nothing that's kind of breaking your energy too much when you're using those skills correctly.

So even though I had been taught those skills at university, seeing them in use in Japan on a daily basis and the practice of doing it myself over a couple of years gave me that sense of rhythm and continuity and fluidity.

**Lisa Cahill:** What was the style of teaching in Japan?

**Jane Sawyer:** So, I had actually had seven teachers in Japan. It was, there were seven members, main members of the co-op. And they were all in their sixties at the time. I was in my twenties, and they were my teachers. And so, and I was one of seven apprentices as well.

So they called the apprentices over, “Oh, look at this, look at this! It’s amazing.”

And they had a pot upside down, a beautiful sort of, I don't know, about a 30-centimetre diameter. Shallow plate slash bowl, you know, shallow dish. But they were looking at the underside of it, not the top of it where it was decorated, but the underside of it, where it was still quite rough clay.

And I was dutifully looking at it as I was told to, but I didn't quite know what I was looking for or why everybody was Oohing and Ahhing so much over this pot.

And over the underside of it, the base of it, until somebody just went, “Oh look, it's just been made, it's just been trimmed in two moves. You know, one move on the inside and one on the outside and that's it.

Can you see that freshness? It's alive, you know. Amazing, amazing skills to be able to do that!”

And suddenly that dish spoke volumes to me about what I was trying to do.

it was obviously through that Japanese lens. And that's a very specific lens. But it was very interesting to me that I was learning that in a production pottery where you're trying to get your movements reduced to the absolute minimum, and the value of that. And not just visually as an aesthetic, but as a trade and what that meant, you know, in terms of the skills of the maker.

**Jane Sawyer:** Because I had seven teachers in Japan and, and I also had Andrew Halford before I went to Japan, I saw seven different touches, seven different signatures in clay, or eight if you include Andrew.

So even though nobody signed anything in the studio that I worked in, and Shussai-gama is the name of the studio in Japan, and it's still running today as a cooperative… You can tell just by looking at the finish, the fine details in the way somebody's finished a rim or trimmed a foot that can give away as a signature can give away, you know, intimate details and identity of the maker.

So when I did a master's degree at RMIT, that's the kind of, that was the kind of pathway into the master's degree that I did and a way of trying to identify my own.. What was my own sense of touch?

It also gave me a way of discussing that with students to say, “Look, you know, we are, we're all as diff different as each other. And we're all the same in so many ways, but we are also, our slight differences are quite enriching. And what can make our artworks different too.”

So, I’m always talking to them about finding their own sense of touch and what that might be. And even though I might be teaching them something quite technical, like “Hold the tool like this” and “Balance your hands”, I’m also countering it with a little sentence: “But if it works for you, do it! If it’s your own way, explore it! Go into it more deeply. That’s going to be your point of difference. I can think of a number of potters whose work I adore, who all have a different identity, just through their sense of touch alone.

Clay is the ultimate reflector, the mirror of who we are. Because even if it's just a fingerprint or a thumbprint, it's telling us visibly back to us, you know, that's your thumbprint, that's who you are.

And you can imagine if that's on a bigger scale, you know, with a bigger object, then your artistic expression can be so intimately connected with your material, with the clay, and with the processes that you use as well.

**Julie Bartholomew:** Well, in my teaching nurturing ceramic practice really starts with skills building. But I also think it's important for students to innovate and be experimental, not to be afraid.

**Lisa Cahill:** Julie Bartholomew is a national and international award-winning ceramic artist. Formerly Head of Ceramics at the ANU and the University of South Australia, Julie currently teaches at the Australian Catholic University.

As a teacher, nurturing clay is really important. There are lots of… incredible broad spectrum of skills, and I think once students have developed skills, they have a confidence in making and that allows them to play more. And because the process of ceramics is so material based and it's all about a body material interaction, anything can happen.

And by looking out for those accidents and the unexpected and the unusual results of playing can really lead to interesting directions, innovative directions, and fresh work.

I also think that it's important for students to develop self-reflective thinking. And what I mean by that, is to be able to look at what they make objectively, rather than being totally immersed in the practice where you can't really see what you're doing.

And that can come from understanding their practice within the context of art history or ceramic history in particular, and contemporary art practice.

People that are new to ceramics, going into the practice, what I would say to them is that because ceramics is just an incredibly collaborative practice. It connects with so many other disciplines, and for instance, like architecture and design and landscaping and geology, chemistry, and you know, sculpture, installation, painting, photography.

The list just goes on. So, usually you'll find that ceramic has some connection to what you already know and have experienced. When I was doing a residency once there was a scientist, a NASA rocket scientist, who decided to give up her profession working for NASA in America and become a ceramic artist. Because she just loved the idea of looking at the earth from space.

So the earth reminded her of clay and ceramics practice. So that's incredible that ceramics can make a connection to a NASA scientist.

**Lisa Cahill:** So I'm interested in your thoughts for people at the start of their career. What overarching principles do you think are important for early career artists and students to keep in mind as they begin their practice?

**Jane Sawyer:** Everything's gotta be driven by desire. You know, you have to love what you are doing because it's not an easy pathway. So, to make to, it's the same as if you were a musician or an actor or, you know, a sports person.

You have to devote a lot more time to this than you think you're going to. It's not easy. So you have to be persistent.

You have to be very, very in love with it and just want to do nothing else. And then I think what really helps is to have an understanding of art history and particularly ceramics history, where you fit in, in the continuum.

So how your contemporary experiences can be fed into your art practice. And I'm talking about as an art practice because essentially that's the broader term that everything else fits under. But whether or not you choose to be, a potter making hundreds of things or you're exhibiting as an artist, you know, or you're a designer.

I think some really sound understanding of ceramics history and contemporary art is really helpful. Learning to see is a big one, you know, and that's fundamental to any education that people take on, I would hope.

Learning to see is a big one. Learning to see and to be curious and exploratory about what you're learning and to ask questions and be led by the materials and processes as much as the concepts and ideas.

I've seen a lot of people give up and it's really sad to me that people give up too soon.

They don't give it that time that it needs to really work through their… It took me a long, long time to work through my own, um, training and to get rid of, you know, there's this saying, you've got to kill your teachers. And it doesn't mean chop their head off, it just means get rid of their influences, their overpowering, dominating influences, which you love and you, you went to them for.

**Jane Sawyer:** Because you don't want to be like anyone else anyway, do you?

I would hate to think that I was sending students out into the world, you know, making my style. I think that would be terrible.

**Lisa Cahill:** It's that authenticity, isn't it? You know, finding as, as you say, finding your own identity and authenticity and that will then bring the authenticity into the work that you're producing. What's your advice for potters who want to teach?

**Jane Sawyer:** That's a really good question because of course my teaching training. As an undergraduate, art teaching training actually was a really good course, and it did teach me a lot about learning and teaching and how we learn and how we can teach effectively.

Learn about the different learning domains. How you might be teaching somebody something, but they might not be listening.

The nitty gritty of education. How do you, how do you call a group's attention to you? You know, when you want to just tell them it's time to pack up, you know.

Like you've got people going everywhere and doing everything, you know, how do you instruct them in a clear way where they're going to follow your instructions?

I always love it when people come to me for jobs and they've already done some teacher training themselves, because then I know, I don't have to worry. I know they're going to do it.

I suppose I just want to be natural, and I want to be a person who they feel comfortable with. I think it's important that people can talk to you about anything. And quite often art brings out all sorts of deeper things, you know, that may be bubbling below the surface. And if you are providing a safe framework for your students to be able to discuss things with you if they need to.

So just to be natural and open and caring. You really want to be able to care about their development and their progress because small steps are often big steps for them. And so to be able to be on their side and you know, really. Encouraging them with their development I think is really important. It’s just as important.

**Lisa Cahill:** Tell me about the Slow Clay Centre.

**Jane Sawyer:** Slow Clay is a ceramics education centre. We are based in Collingwood in Melbourne, and I started it 10 years ago.

**Lisa Cahill:** Jane, I'm interested in how centres like Slow Clay Centre, your centre that you've just described, how that fits within the broader educational framework for learning ceramics?

**Jane Sawyer:** Um, I'm not a hundred percent sure it does. I feel like we are kind of a little bit of an island on our own. Before I started Slow Clay, we had a wonderful network of TAFE colleges and universities that specialised in ceramics, both here in Melbourne and throughout Australia.

I used to actively feed students into that system from my classes at home.

But when I started Slow Clay Centre, it seemed like it coincided with a lot of those places closing. A lot of those institutions closing their ceramics courses, which was just devastating. So, it's actually really hard to feed students to anywhere other than the major universities - so RMIT, National Art School in Sydney and the ANU in Canberra.

it has actually made us more aware that we have to teach at a high level as well if we can.

So there are a lot of schools that have opened up since the popularity of ceramics has mushroomed in the last few years. There are a lot of people popping up that are teaching ceramics in their studios and perhaps at a hobby level without being derogatory.

But we really do want to provide at that higher level as well as we can. So by doing, studio subjects such as the history of ceramics and focusing on things that are particular to the ceramics field and yeah, that sets us apart a little bit.

**Lisa Cahill:** Yeah, I think the terrain is very different today, from what it was, you know, 10, 15 years ago. And certainly, there are far less opportunities to study ceramics at a professional level. So, I suppose, what you're doing through your centre and other centres like it around the country is to some extent bridging that gap. But certainly not, as you say, you're not equipped or funded to provide professional degree level training to students or to poly level training to students.

So, I think it's a challenge for us going forward.

**Jane Sawyer:** It is, it's a huge challenge. And my good friend Janet DeBoos has, uh, she almost, uh, had a second sense and predicted this, I don't know, it would've been about 15, 20 years ago.

She wrote a wonderful article or a kind of sad article in many ways, called the Distributed Studio, where she made a case for, with institutions closing, that the ways that young people would train in the future would have to be more varied. They would have to choose their specialties according to who they would learn from, and how they would find those people would have to be much more independent and, and individuated.

**Lisa Cahill:** Hmm we've got the degree diploma level, fine art courses, some very good degree and diploma courses still available around the country. What does the future of education in ceramics look like to you?

**Jane Sawyer:** I'd like to see more studio-based training. When you have a trainee in your studio helping you, they're doing jobs for you and you are, and they're learning in return, and it's a wonderful win-win. But it does need funding.

I would love to see some TAFE courses come back in. I don’t know whether it’s too late to get back what you’ve lost, but I’d love to have one or two TAFE courses in Melbourne. I’m speaking very locally here because I know there are other cities still have TAFE courses.

I'd love to see some international exchanges. I see the future for ceramics education in Australia as being multilayered. There are so many different approaches but having some international exchanges would be great. Having some stronger institutionalised learning would be fantastic and having some opportunities to work with people in their own studios that were funded. And also, postgraduate system, a healthy postgraduate system. That can really help one to articulate their ideas and define their pathway much better.

**Lisa Cahill:** Yeah, thank you so much Jane. It's been fantastic to talk to you.

**Jane Sawyer:** Thank you so much.

**Lisa Cahill:** That was ceramics artist and teacher Jane Sawyer. I was surprised to learn that Jane had had eight teachers in her career. It made me reflect on how teachers emerge at different times and different places, and potters often learn from each other too.

I found it interesting how Jane uses her experience as a student to inform her teaching practice. She encourages students to make their own mark on the clay to ensure their work is unique to them and their ideas. And how learning from makers in other cultures, in Jane’s case, Japan, enriches the experience for the maker.

To see images of Jane teaching and her work, go to the Australian Design Centre website.

In the next episode of Object, you'll meet ceramics writer, Robyn Phelan.

**Robyn Phelan:** I love that sense of, you know, embodying the work, embodying the work in space, and experiencing the work as is presented by either by a curator or by an artist in a space.

And I think in a show, the opening lines is “What do you see? What do you feel?”

That hook, something that breaks down the distance between the reader and the writer. “I went here, I saw this, I felt this. I observed this with my eyes.”

**Lisa Cahill:** Object is a podcast of the Australian Design Centre.

We'd like to thank Visions of Australia, the Federal government’s regional exhibition touring program for funding support towards this podcast.

Object is produced by Jane Curtis, in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash.

Sound Engineering is by John Jacobs. Thanks for listening.