

Craft Education: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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There seems to be a pervasive anxiety in American crafts today. Attendance at craft fairs has declined since the boom years of the 1990s, and some experienced makers have been forced out of the business for lack of sales. Certain individuals forecast the gradual extinction of the crafts as we know them. Handwork, they say, is by nature irrelevant in the 21st Century.

In addition, more than a few college-teaching craft studios have been terminated over the past two decades. (This is particularly bad in Great Britain.) And while new craft programs are occasionally started up, the closures outnumber the openings. I think you all know the stories; there is no need for me to repeat them.

To me, the abandonment of craft instruction is most vividly recounted in the closure of the weaving studio at Carnegie-Mellon University in the mid-1980's. The administration had determined that instruction should be concentrated largely within two-dimensional and three-dimensional art practices. Craft studios not truly devoted to sculpture were shut down one by one. I recall one visit when I saw looms sitting in a dark corridor, gradually being scavenged for interesting bits and pieces by enterprising art students. Craft equipment – which other programs would have been happy to use – had been reduced to leftover art supplies.

The decline of craft instruction at the college level is now being hastened by a fashion for construing all suitable art making to be, by definition, a post-conceptual practice of research, with no particular end product in mind. This approach mirrors art practice of the 1990s. Artists worked in any and all formats, if that's the proper term – performances, digital forms, videos, installations, texts, and social interventions.

The educational structure to accommodate this post-conceptual practice consists of a relatively unstructured curriculum – a series of introductory courses followed by what used to be called independent study for up to two years. The concept of a major course of study has been jettisoned. The student uses whatever studio facility (or course) most closely fits his or her agenda at the moment. Upon graduation, presumably the student is perfectly adaptable to whatever art trends that might show up in the magazines.

In this version of art education, craft is construed as one option among many, ready to be subsumed into a larger body of art. Students are free to float from one studio to another. Wherever the most energy is found, there students will gravitate. All studios are satellites,

every previous studio practice is reduced to being service or a resource for students who come and go freely.

Needless to say, this structure does not bode well for the intensive study of craft. The traditional craft forms – pots, jewelry, chairs, weavings – are re-conceived as elements in installations, if they are made at all. There is no incentive for the patient accumulation of skills, and no particular value placed on tradition.

This is the vision of the future presented by Warren Seelig and others at the American Craft Council's national conference in Houston in 2006. The audience saw images of installations, many of them from the West coast, that occasionally featured one craft material or another mixed with sticks, photographs, plastic flowers, sporting goods, or whatever. Some of the stuff the audience saw could not be construed as craft in any meaningful way – a giant teddy bear made of fiberglass insulation, a housing development in England. We were instructed – at great length – that the future of craft is to be a component of installation art. As Seelig said later, “craft is dead.”

I recall talking with Mark Pharis and Andrea Gill after one of those sessions. They could read the handwriting on the wall. The idea of craft instruction as a sustained study of medium and technique and history is now obsolete. What thousands of men and women have labored for a century to build is about to be tossed onto history's scrap heap – if some of the presenters were to be believed. Mark and Andrea were not happy campers.

The cheerleading about post-conceptual practice overlooked several inconvenient facts. First, the hybrid practices being touted are not of the future – they are emphatically of the present. The only thing we know for sure is that the hottest art will be different five and ten years from now. Those interminable presentations – and Seelig's announcement that craft is dead – *may* have nothing to do with the future.

The dissolution of craft into a hybrid, post conceptual practice is the logical conclusion of an intellectual trend that first gained momentum in the late 1950's and early '60's. Ambitious craftspeople like Peter Voukos, Wendell Castle, or Lenore Tawney all shifted the emphasis of their work towards sculpture made from craft mediums. They wanted to make art-with-a-capital-A. It was a logical enough choice at the time. Having internalized the modernist narrative of endless innovation, of the permanent revolution of an artistic avant-garde, hundreds of craftspeople found the sculpture/craft hybrid to be far more interesting than a “mere” pot, bracelet, or table. Hell, I was one of them. We all wanted to be artists, regardless of the repercussions.

Now, with the consequences taking shape, we might collectively wonder if all that art-envy was such a good thing.

The second factor that the craft-is-dead crew overlooked is that there is a substantial grass roots interest in crafts among them the newest generation to reach maturity. These people, raised on television, cell phones, and the Internet, want to use their hands again. There's something of a do-it-yourself movement afoot, with a kitschy, self-mocking sensibility that is getting no publicity in the craft press. Furthermore, increasing numbers of young people are interested in the handmade – at least partly for its absolute dissociations from shopping malls and media hype.

That's the subject for another presentation entirely. I bring it up to show that things are changing rapidly, and the impending death of craft may be vastly overstated.

Still, one might want to know if sound education in the crafts will still be available on college campuses when kids show up wanting to make pots again. Having been a citizen of the academic community, I can say with some assurance that a new and persuasive reasoning for the continued presence of craft instruction at the college level has not been advanced. As far as I can tell, the health of college craft instruction is largely dependent on local conditions – on the degree of understanding and support in whatever administration is at hand. Some conditions are good, others are not. It's the luck of the draw.

Personally, I am not content with the present situation. It seems to me that the survival of craft instruction depends – in part – on the construction of an argument that places craft at the center of contemporary higher education, not at the margins.

That's what I'm going to talk about today. For me, this is a matter of some urgency. I came upon jewelry by happenstance 45 years ago at Syracuse University, and the encounter changed my life. I want to know that exactly the same life-altering experience remains available for the next generation, and the one after that.

However, I must say that my presentation today is speculative – not much more than thinking out loud in public. My hope is that these ideas will serve as stimulation for further debate and discussion. It would be wrong to think that I am about to offer you a finished product – a ready-made argument you can wrap up and present to your college dean.

My sense is that the case for craft education at the college level should be addressed to a generalized liberal arts university. Why? Because liberal arts institutions place a rigorous intellectual demand (in theory, if not quite in practice) on subjects taught in that environment. To justify a subject within the liberal arts framework – say, English or

Comparative Literature or even Business –one must answer specific questions about the subject’s place in the larger society, and its ability to demand intellectual engagement. If craft can answer the questions imposed by the liberal arts ideal, it can answer similar questions raised by small colleges, art schools – and in fact, almost any educational setting.

Second, my sense is that craft must be conceived not as a subset of fine art, but as a distinct field of both practice and study. In my view, craft is related to both art and design – and overlaps portions of both – but is distinct enough to merit being a field unto itself.

We are now accustomed to thinking of “design” as constituting a different enterprise than art – not the least because this country now has specific business sectors that hire college trained designers in substantial numbers. Design fields look a lot like professions – a very useful and seductive fact. So, we all think of graphic design, industrial design, fashion design – even toy design and digital game design – as constituting unique fields that require special courses of study at the college level.

While the analogy between craft and design is far from perfect, the comparison is useful. In practical terms instruction in craft and design was once the same thing in this country – consisting of drawing courses and lectures on historical decoration. The first modern design courses in the United States created only in 1935 – as an industrial design program at Carnegie-Mellon University. Industrial design and then graphic design, were conceived from the beginnings as having different ends and means than any of the fine arts, which helps explain their astonishing success in college-level education.

Furthermore, I believe craft simply is not the same thing as art. It’s a different animal. I have always resisted assertions that craft and art are essentially the same thing. I won’t elaborate on the basic differences between art and craft here; I leave it to you to work out the old art/craft debate on your own.

It’s a question of clarity. If craft has any hope at all of asserting its position in either the liberal arts or the visual arts, it must claim its own identity, its own competence, its own educational methods, its own history, and its own forms. None of these are particularly hard to identify, but defining craft with some precision remains the first step of the entire project.

OK. So: what are the liberal arts? In the modern era, the liberal arts studies include the humanities, which in turn include the arts. Historically, craft education at the college level was not always categorized within either the humanities or the arts – more on this later.

But further back in history, in the early Renaissance, painting and sculpture were regarded as trades, something a simple journeyman might do. Visual art was of a much lower order than

poetry, philosophy, or rhetoric – and did not occupy its present exalted position in the liberal arts. A painter was a plain old laborer, not a humanist. He was not exalted.

The promotion of painting and sculpture from trade to liberal art was made starting in 1435, when Leon Battista Alberti drew a parallel between painting and poetry in his book, “De Pictura.” His aim was to promote painting and sculpture to one of the liberal arts.

The liberal arts were formulated in Greek and Roman philosophy. They represented the peak of human culture, and were part of every cultivated man’s education. Traditionally, they were Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy

Alberti’s parallel goes: “as painting, so poetry.” It was designed to raise the stature of painting to that of the classical seven liberal arts. To make a long story short, the gambit worked, and few people now dispute the legitimacy of the fine arts’ place along side poetry, literature, and philosophy.

The classical liberal arts, as opposed to the sciences, attend to the life of men and women, both as individual humans and as social beings, situated in culture. The liberal arts are broadly humanistic, having to do with intellectual cultivation, and the training that produces it. Alongside the development of the intellect, the liberal arts also encourage fostering human feelings and sensibility that ultimately lead to moral behavior.

It is within the concepts of humanism, cultivation of intellect, and morality that craft can make its case for inclusion among the liberal arts. While that might seem a bit of a stretch, allow me to approach the subject indirectly with a digression on the history of studio craft education at the college level in this country.

As far as I know, the first hands-on crafts course ever taught in an American institution of higher learning was at the University of Cincinnati in 1873. Before that moment there was no practical distinction made between industrial production and handcraft – and most craft training took the form of apprenticeships in shops. A system of design education had been established in Massachusetts in 1870, but this was strictly an education in drawing. The Cincinnati course was in woodcarving, and it was intended to provide training to the “operatives” in the local furniture industry. However, thanks to the elaborate woodcarving that had already been done for the house of Mariah Longworth Nichol’s father, a fair number of society women decided to take the Cincinnati woodcarving course. More than three-quarters of the enrollment in the first semester consisted of women, most of them from prosperous families. The proportion remained constant for most of the 49- year history of Cincinnati woodcarving instruction.

These women were not future employees for local factories; they carved strictly for their own edification. This phenomenon – of working in a craft medium for the pleasure it affords – is one of the most important factors that separates modern craft from its job-oriented predecessors. I suspect that most of the people in this room recognize the centrality of pleasure in labor in their own lives as ceramists. Certainly, I recognize it as a jeweler. We get involved in a craft because the work is compelling in a way unlike anything else we have experienced. And while some aspects of craft can be sheer drudgery, we all keep working because, at some level, the work itself remains deeply satisfying.

Much craft instruction in this country can be traced back to a different source: The Manual Training Movement. First instituted in this country in 1825, it was popularized by a mathematician named Calvin Woodward. Critical of the traditional practice of teaching by rote memorization, Woodward built the nation's first manual training high school in 1880. He made two basic arguments for manual training. One – and this was the argument that carried the day once the Great Depression set in – was that manual training prepared future workers for their jobs. They were educated to be more employable, which made parents and industrialists happy. For this reason, The Manual Training Movement enjoyed widespread popular and political support.

But Woodward also stressed the character-building aspect of manual training. When students learned to work directly in materials (wood- and metalworking were the early mainstays of manual training) Woodward felt they were learning moral lessons as well. He wrote in 1908: “it is not the making of things that is important, but the making of strong men and women through the swift and sound development that begins when the child begins to use its hands for the shaping of something which is really needed. It is going back to the spirit of the primitive beginning of handicrafts –which marks the beginning of civilization – and is so important in the growth of character.”

Woodward was repeating the insights of John Ruskin, whose “The Nature of the Gothic” was the single most important document in the entire Arts and Crafts Movement. Ruskin felt strongly that work should not be just about mechanical repetition, or about maximizing efficiency, but about exerting a positive moral influence. As he famously said of the worker: “You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him.” In giving the worker the power to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing – Ruskin's words again – the worker is given the chance to be more fully human.

The idea of labor – and for Ruskin and his many admirers this was specifically handwork – that labor should ennoble the worker was tremendously attractive. It suggested a humanist third way between socialist revolution and money-grubbing capitalist exploitation. It made

the preservation of handwork socially relevant. And, in one way or another, the linkage between handwork and moral improvement has been with us ever since. What teacher has not marked the transformation of the occasional student from “lost soul” to a motivated, disciplined artist, and not thought that the student was both a better person, and better prepared for life beyond the studio.

The ideal of craft as an agent of moral improvement became one of the central justifications for the instruction of craft on any level. Calvin Woodward’s argument has already been noted, and hundreds of arts and crafts reformers repeated variations of the same message.

I have heard, for instance, that the state university system of Wisconsin once required every single student to take a manual arts course. In so doing, the student would encounter a more balanced life, with physical and mental work represented as equals.

I should note, however, that manual training itself not really taught at the college level. (Most manual training took place in high schools.) Instead, it was the training of manual arts teachers that became a major subject of higher education early in the 20th Century. An act of congress – The Smith-Hughes Act – funded manual arts teacher education nationwide, along with home economics teacher education for women. Departments were established and flourished under a variety of names such as vocational education, vocational technology, and the like. In the 1970’s shop courses in high schools began to be shut down, decreasing the demand for teachers, and the movement has since been pushed to the far margins of education.

Early in the 20th Century, another argument for the place of craft in higher education was advanced. It was a reformulation of the idea that designers for industry should be trained at specialized colleges – an ideal that motivated the foundation of the Rhode Island School of Design, the California School of Arts and Crafts, the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art, and many other institutions. A revised version, which was codified in Walter Gropius’s first syllabus for the Bauhaus, held that training in a craft was a desirable preparation for a career as either a designer or an architect. The theory was that hands-on experience with a craft material would sensitize students to the innate physical properties of any object, including buildings. Tied as it was to Modernism, the Bauhaus idea proved immensely seductive to American reformers in the 1930’s and ‘40’s. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s New Bauhaus was the most influential school at disseminating this idea in the United States. Both craftwork and machine work were construed as exercises that sensitized the student to abstract form and the properties of a given material.

The Bauhaus idea repositioned craft as an equal partner in design education, then still in its infancy. Because the ultimate objective was design, not the production of actual objects, the Bauhaus idea was perfectly acceptable within the liberal arts schema. Craft was promoted to intellectual activity, above the sweat and dirt of labor. However, as more and more industrial design departments opened, the role of craft in their curricula diminished.

And no wonder. The number of materials available to the industrial designer exploded in the 1950's and 60's, especially with the introduction of new synthetics like plastics, fiberglass and composites. Similarly, the techniques developed for synthetic materials became so varied and so industrialized that literal, hands-on training of all of them was a practical impossibility. Second, throughout the 1960's craft students became less and less interested in training for mass production. Self-expression became the objective of craft education, not collaboration with industry.

So three distinct reasons were advanced for the inclusion of craft education in the university setting: training of manual arts and home economics teachers; the presumed moral improvement imparted by handwork; and the utility of craft training for industrial design. A fourth reason - that intimate familiarity with physical labor is essential to a balanced life - was also acknowledged.

The liberal arts establishment was, in some ways, hostile to the teaching of craft within its hallowed halls. The most obvious reason is that craft, so rooted in labor, can appear to be utterly dumb. Without a centuries-long discourse of criticism, and without a well-documented history, contemporary craft looked resolutely un-intellectual. Acceptance into the liberal arts club requires something of a track record of intellectual activity – which is to say, writing. Early in the 20th Century, the writings of Ruskin and Morris might have been enlisted for the cause, but they both fell out of favor by the 30's. No dominant voice replaced them. Craft criticism, which did exist, was written primarily by art critics, and did not develop its own vocabulary or its own theoretical position. Thus, the sheer physicality of craft – the hours at the wheel or the loom, came to be interpreted as the salient characteristic of craft practice.

Secondly, craft carried with it an ancient association with the trades, and trades are not within the purview of the liberal arts. The presumptions were that preparation for a trade is not terribly difficult, or it can be completed in the secondary schools, or it is not properly a subject for scholarship. One would not think, for instance, that it should be necessary to go to college for four years to become a roofer. Historically, training for a blue-collar vocation has never been part of the liberal arts.

Which raises the issue of the distinction between a trade and a profession. The original seven liberal arts, as taught at universities and colleges, spurned all direct relations to business and the profit motive. The first professional training that was tolerated on the university campus was for the clergy – altogether free of the stain of commerce. As the 19th century progressed, other professions were added – law, medicine, engineering, architecture – most of them regulated by an examination or a licensing procedure. The college education of a profession was constructed as a rigorous training to ensure sound professional practice, and thus a legitimate cousin to the classical liberal arts. In time, other, less-regulated professions were added – business, industrial design, journalism. I’m not sure how these subjects were justified, but they had certain factors in common. First, they could be made to appear to be intellectual in nature, and could respond to scholarly analysis. Second, they all appeared to be white-collar work, free from associations with physical labor and the working class. Third, and most importantly, good jobs were available for college grads, and over time the college degree became a requirement for a job within some of these professions.

Craft, on the other hand, never coalesced into an identifiable profession. It’s a field of small businesses, with few employees and modest remuneration. The field can still be entered without a college education – a college degree never became a necessity. There’s no great demand for trained craftspeople in the job market. And the crafts have divided themselves into ghettos – like the one represented by the attendees of the NCECA conference – undermining any sense that the crafts are, in fact, a single profession. All these factors conspired against the legitimation that the status of “profession” confers upon a field. One result is craft’s uncertainty as a subject of study in the liberal arts environment.

Under these conditions, what arguments can be deployed for the inclusion of craft within the liberal arts?

First, I don’t believe the fact that craft is pleasurable labor is a good justification. It may be a significant motivation for thousands, and it may contribute to the quality of life for many. But it remains pleasure – a good and useful emotion to be sure – but an emotion nonetheless. That craft is pleasurable labor can be –and has been – cited to justify craft studios as a service to students. But not as a reason for being the subject of study. It would be like offering a four-year degree in doing down to the local café and having a cup of coffee. Pleasurable, perhaps, but not scholarly.

I confess that I haven’t done much research on existing justifications for the teaching of crafts on university campuses – the usual claim is that students make art in craft media – and so there may be a measure of naiveté to my proposals. Still, I can offer five different arguments, two of which suspect are new.

My first argument is simple: the best repositories of knowledge about the crafts in this country are located in institutions of higher learning. It is at the college level that the bulk of transmission of craft knowledge from one generation to the next now occurs. This knowledge – practical, technical, and theoretical – has been accumulating over the past 140 years. Many of the first American texts on craft practice were written by college professors – Rose and Cirino of RISD in jewelry; Charles Binns of Alfred University and George Cox of Columbia University in ceramics; Burl Osburn in pewter work. After the Second World War, the revival of American Crafts took place largely in college teaching studios. The spirit of experimentation fostered by the academic community was absolutely vital to the careers of many of the most prominent craftspeople of the past half-century – from Peter Voulkos to Berry Woodman; from Albert Paley to William Harper; from Anni Albers to Lia Cook. Other institutions exist, but none place such a clear emphasis on professional development and sustained, high-level education.

At the same time, the old institutions for the transfer of craft knowledge faltered. The apprenticeship system collapsed, and the factory system that replaced it had no formal educational structures. Training within the present production community is uneven, and most working crafts people cannot afford to give a comprehensive education in their craft before they put their new employees on the payroll full-time. Summer schools cannot provide either a permanent facility or a fixed student body.

The few surviving trade schools concentrate on technical knowledge, offering nothing in the way of design critique, theory, or a larger historical background.

The fact is that colleges are now the primary repositories of craft knowledge, and the primary vehicles for sophisticated craft education. They are also the most important sites of innovations in the crafts.

All this implies that any association between the crafts and the trades is wrong-headed. The studio crafts have, in fact, severed their connections to rote manual labor. Assertions to the contrary are based on myth, and can be easily refuted.

Studio craft now has a vigorous intellectual component. It is no accident that Garth Clark was given the Mather Award by the College Art Association in 2006. He is only one of a sizeable band of incisive critical writers - Glen Brown, John Perrault, Edmund De Waal and many others. A growing number of accomplished scholars are documenting the field, let by figures like Edward Cook Jr., Glenn Adamson, Wendy Kaplan and Tanya Harrod.

The field can also point to a new generation of makers who are just as smart and just as engaged in theory as any visual artist. My two favorites are Josiah McIlhenny and Myra Mimlitch-Gray, but there are dozens – maybe hundreds, of others.

Thus, I would assert, the studio crafts now belong within the precincts of academia simply as fact that. By any contemporary standard, the crafts should qualify as one of the liberal arts. I think the case is persuasive, and could be made with confidence anywhere. The crafts have been a resident in the liberal arts for more than a century, and they should become citizens at last.

Now, let me be clear: I'm talking about status within the academy. Crafts can be construed as one of the liberal arts. I am not suggesting that crafts be taught in liberal arts departments, not at all. Their present residency in art departments, while imperfect, is quite suitable.

There are other arguments that support my first one. The humanities are concerned with the development of the whole person – not just those aspects of mind that are engaged in literacy and analysis and mathematics. At this point, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence is a useful reference because he proposes that the human mind is composed of several linked capacities, each one specializing in a certain area. He posits an intelligence of relationships, for instance, and an intelligence of bodily motion. It is this last one that is most directly manifested in craft practice.

While Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences remains somewhat speculative, research conducted with detailed brain scans prove that the brain is indeed divided into modules, some devoted to very specific tasks. Theory and evidence strongly suggest that classical conceptions of mind can be re-mapped as brain functions. Our concept of our own humanity – and our intelligence – may be accurately mirrored in brain structure. In turn, the concept of the humanities may have to be broadened. The old conceit of mind above body may be demonstrably false.

Thus, if the goal of liberal education is the development and refinement of the whole person, it may behoove us to encourage courses of study that negate the classical mind-body duality. And I can think of few disciplines that engage both mind and body so thoroughly, and so effectively, as the study of craft.

It's common knowledge that craft courses provide a successful educational experience for kids with dyslexia. Frustrated by coursework that demands reading and writing skills that they just don't have, these students sometimes find in craft a combination of imagination, envisioning in three-dimensions, and using fine motor skills that suits them perfectly. And sometimes, these students find craft to be the only courses in the entire educational system

that fit their abilities. This fact is beginning to draw the attention of educators who believe that such kids should not be excluded from the process of schooling simply because their brains are wired differently than the norm.

I recently learned that the public school system in Santa Fe is building a blacksmithing forge to accommodate just such students, based on the experience that Tom Joyce had with taking at-risk kids as apprentices.

The same reform could be demanded of the university system. Why exclude these people? Why not provide them with an opportunity to study something they can succeed in? Some of them are capable of great things – as jeweler Bob Ebendorf has shown. Bob has struggled with dyslexia all his life, and jewelry-making provided him a discipline in which he could not only thrive, but excel. Craft offers an expanded field for education, one that can respond to many different kinds of minds.

Which goes to the idea of educational diversity. This country is finally becoming sensitized to the considerable variety of races, ethnicities and religions that can be found here, and the academy has taken a leading role in trying to accommodate them. And yet, the bean-counting mentality that has overtaken some universities treats education as if each classroom had to produce a high return on investment. That mentality results in cutting smaller, more expensive programs, even at institutions that are in excellent financial condition. In the end, educational diversity is diminished, and yet another group of students is denied the chance to find the educational path that suits them best.

Given what we already know about various learning disabilities, one would think that academia would place a higher priority on its own intellectual diversity. It may be a stretch – but craft can be deployed as part of a larger attempt to reclaim higher education so it serves the needs of its students, in addition to the economic needs of its administrations. Craft is a friend of diversity.

Educators talk a great deal about smaller class sizes. Research has shown that public school class sizes have an important determining effect on outcomes: smaller is better. Craft instruction, by virtue of the space limitations imposed by the workspace, always takes place in a small classroom setting. It's rare anymore for undergraduate students to come in daily contact with senior professors, and yet such contact is commonplace in craft studios. Speaking for myself, I became both informal advisor and mentor to many of my students – largely because I had the time to get to know them. This is a luxury afforded by small class size. While it's commonly thought of as a liability of craft instruction, seen in a different light, it can become an important asset.

There is one more argument for craft education that I would like to speak about, and that's its ability to instill positive values – or if you like, to build character. This is, I admit, risky territory, since we are accustomed to shying away from questions of morality in public institutions. And yet, I contend that part of a comprehensive craft education must, by its nature, instill something in the way of good values and character in an attentive student.

The subject of moral improvement is not altogether foreign in the present-day academy. One of the fields most given to justifying itself in terms of positive values is sports.

I've heard the mythology repeated many times. Sports teaches young people the virtue of teamwork – how to function within a structured role in order to attain a common goal. A student who understands teamwork is supposed to be able to put his or her ego aside, and become part of a cooperative venture for the greater good. This, we generally agree, makes for a more productive worker and a more generous-minded citizen. We are also told that participation in sports builds self-esteem, conditions the student for a healthier life, and helps forge lasting friendships. It also teaches students how to get along with others.

Presumably, some of this is true. And if it is true, one might suggest that craft education also imparts certain virtues. Ruskin suggested that self-directed handwork forced the worker to think for himself, to learn self-reliance instead of merely following directions. That sounds plausible to me. Think of beginning students, struggling to find their way through an assignment that demands creativity. Not all succeed, but those that do gain a measure of confidence that is hard to come by any other way. Or think of the discipline that learning a craft imposes: the effort to get something right, the occasional frustration, and the accomplishment of finally gaining some control over a reluctant medium. And the nice thing about craft is that success is plainly visible – in the perfect clay cylinder, in a smooth planishing job, in straight selvedges.

I don't think I'm spouting baloney here. It's an interesting argument, and it bears further discussion. I figure that if college football coaches can talk about instilling positive values, so can craft professors. And craft doesn't have recruiting scandals!

I want to close with two more ideas. I'm not sure where they lead, but they could be productive avenues of thought.

The first is that traditional craft skills applied to traditional craft forms are closely related to the performance of classical repertory in dance and music. The exercise of tacit craft knowledge is a kind of performance.

This insight came to me when I attended a performance by the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. The evening's program included "Revelations," an piece that Ailey choreographed to old spirituals. It's a wonderful, moving dance, justifiably famous. It also premiered 47 years ago, and there can be no pretense that "Revelations" is part of today's cutting-edge dance.

A performance of "Revelations" thus operates somewhere between reproduction and preservation. Every move is prescribed: dancers have little or no opportunity to improvise. And yet, the skill of the individual dancer makes all the difference. A great dancer, can make a role vivid and compelling, a poor dancer makes it dull. In the crispness and athleticism of the dancer's movements, the devout attention to exact positioning, and in some indefinable ability to communicate the emotional content of Ailey's intentions, lies the elements of great performance. Audiences don't expect invention. That was Ailey's part – but audiences demand brilliant interpretation. And their appreciation of the performance is not diminished because they might know the choreography beforehand. A great performance still receives a standing ovation.

As in repertory, so in craft? Or, more properly, the kind of craft that trades in known forms, and depends on skill, knowledge and nuance for its success. Tea bowls, for instance. Functional teapots. Storage jars. Forms that are intentionally placed at some remove from the avant-garde, forms that are designed to be compared to great pots of past and present, and *not* to sculpture. It seems to me that these objects are, in a sense, performances: the potter's ability put on a conspicuous display of skilled knowledge, which we then judge and compare. And it seems to me that virtuosity comes into play - that indefinable capacity to communicate at some higher level that transcends mere skill. These objects are craft's repertory.

Why does this matter? Because college-level craft instruction is, to some degree, the institution that can preserve and encourage such performances, however unfashionable they might become. The academy serves as an insulator from art world trends and market forces. Furthermore, the academy can function as the transmission point for these values and skills into the next generations.

It seems to me that any discussion of craft education must center on practice. Artistic trends change, and the interests of students change with them. But the basic practices of craft do not, however much we might embrace new technologies. The practice of ceramics centers on throwing, handbuilding, mold-making, glazing and firing. The practice of jewelry-making is based on constructing and forming. You get the point. And if the crafts as we know them are to survive through this century into the next, the teaching of those traditional practices has to continue. There simply is no alternative. Without the practice, craft

becomes de-skilled, happenstance. In effect, it would transform into a series of hobbies and dumbed-down resources for occasional use by visual artists.

To gain entry to practice, a student *must* practice, like a musician playing scales over and over. The craft student must repeat and repeat again – in the guise of assignments – those operations that constitute the core of the practice. I know this sounds awfully conservative, but that’s what I think. Even the most cursory study of the history of American studio craft reveals that we almost lost the various craft practices, and they were recovered only with a great deal of time and work. I see no reason to repeat history. The core practices of each medium are what we must teach. And while it might be difficult to explain to deans and comptrollers and university presidents, craft teachers need to put practice at the center of their mission.

At this point in time, I think craft lacks a credible narrative to justify its continuing place in higher education. The old narratives – from Ruskin and Morris, from Calvin Woodward, maybe even from the Bauhaus, fail to persuade any more. To think of craft as a subset of fine art is to invite erasure. The field – as a whole, not as any one medium group – needs to assemble a new narrative.

To that end, I make a modest proposal. Couldn’t the medium groups like NCECA that have education as part of their mission get together and do the job? Couldn’t a small committee of interested parties – I would suggest seven to nine individuals – be jointly funded? And couldn’t this committee methodically study existing narratives, solicit new ones, and then assemble the best ideas in a document that could be used in any institution of higher learning? When a program is under threat, or a faculty position is scheduled to be cut, or when a program makes a bid for expansion – in every case, a sophisticated argument must be presented to the powers that be.

It’s folly to let each faculty member try to reinvent the wheel every time the argument must be furnished. Craft needs a sophisticated, persuasive case that can cut across all medium boundaries, that can be deployed quickly, that can be repeated publicly and privately, that can serve as both defense and offense in today’s competitive academic setting. And, as in most things, if the job is to be done properly, it must be done by educators themselves. Waiting for another party – the ACC, the CAA, or whatever, is, again, folly.

I have to admit that I’m not being practical here. As I said, I’m thinking out loud. The process of assembling a cogent argument is necessarily collaborative, and all I’m trying to do is put forward some ideas for further consideration. The rest is up to you, individually and collectively.

