VTE VOCATION, TECHNOLOGY & EDUCATION

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

The future of informal apprenticeship in the artisanal pottery sector

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ABSTRACT

With the decline of the ceramics industry and colleges in the UK, the formal apprenticeship system and training programs associated with ceramics have disappeared. However, there remain a large number of commercial studio-based potters in the UK, who facilitated and formed informal networks for teaching and learning ceramics. The literature on informal apprenticeship overwhelmingly focuses on forms of apprenticeship in developing countries. However, informal apprenticeships exist in parallel to formal regulated apprenticeships in global northern countries. This paper draws on data from a study of craft potters in the UK to explore what we can learn about informal forms of apprenticeship that emerged in the aftermath of 20th century de-industrialization for thinking about the future of apprenticeships in the 21st century. Our finding shows organizational and pedagogical possibilities for future apprenticeships as well as shifts in thinking about when apprenticeship occurs in the life course.

Key words: skills formation system, post-industrialization, informal apprenticeship, ceramics industry, UK

INTRODUCTION

The literature on informal apprenticeship overwhelmingly focuses on forms of apprenticeship in developing countries (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2023; Avenyo 2023). However, informal apprenticeships exist in parallel to formal regulated apprenticeships in global northern countries. The teaching and learning of craft knowledge was once effectively produced and reproduced within the traditional apprenticeship model, under craft guild regulations and supervision (Lane, 2005) from the Middle Ages through to the 18th and 19th centuries. That traditional space for craft training became linked to factories and colleges due to technological development and market expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries (Gospel, 1995). With the decline of the ceramics industry in the UK the formal apprenticeship system associated with ceramics has disappeared (Unwin, 1996). Formal training programs and facilities at colleges and universities have declined. However, there remain a large number of commercial studio-based potters in the UK. Some 1500 professional studio potters still operate in the UK, together with 13,000 amateur and leisure potters. The question that needs addressing is how, when and where people learn the skills within this informal system.

The potters we interviewed described a variety of learning pathways into their current occupations. A majority had chosen to pursue pottery as an occupation after careers in other fields. While some were almost entirely self-taught, informal master-apprentice arrangements were common. These took a variety of forms and often involved networks that facilitated varied place-based learning settings rather than dyadic master-apprentice relationships. Significant elements of learning

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from "masters" were mediated through media such as YouTube and other forms of asynchronous engagement with practice, raising interesting questions about the affordances of virtual reality and other digital learning platforms.

This paper draws on data from a study of craft potters in the UK to ask the question: What can we learn about informal forms of apprenticeship that emerged in the aftermath of 20st century de-industrialization for thinking about the future of apprenticeships in the 21st century? The findings raise options for models of apprenticeship in occupations where regulated and institutionalized pathways do not exist or have been dismantled. As the nature of work shifts and mass production processes become increasingly deskilled, moves to retain or resuscitate craft work provide grounds for exploring organizational and pedagogical possibilities for future apprenticeships as well as shifts in thinking about when apprenticeship occurs in the life course.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The paper draws on qualitative interview and observation from a study by Li (2023). Twenty studio potters were asked about how they learned their craft. Data were analyzed thematically to explore the learning journeys of the potters, the formal and non-formal education processes, and whether master-apprentice relationships existed. Secondary analysis of historical accounts and policy documents were utilized from an adjacent study (Li *et al.*, 2023) into the historical shifts in the skills ecosystem to provide a broader contextual background.

All participants had at least 5 years' experience, with most having more than 15-20 years' experience of working in the ceramics field. They all had their own studios independently or collaboratively with other ceramicists and made their living through ceramics rather than ceramics being their hobby.

FINDINGS

All participants had their own distinct stories and multiple journeys of learning ceramics. Besides formal industrial apprenticeships and craft-based courses, two had learnt pottery in their families since childhood. Four participants had been trained through part-time being apprentices of experienced potters and working in their studios. Two participants learnt their skills through attending short courses. Thirteen participants taught different forms of ceramics courses.

Influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement and other social movements (Krugh, 2014), craftspeople have built up their own workshops and connected with other makers and learners and gradually have formed informal communities and networks. These play important roles in the teaching and learning of craft knowledge. Our respondents kept learning from their peers who had more experience with certain techniques: "And then of course [I learnt by] going around with my eyes open, my ears open, talking to people, talking to colleagues and we all help each other. So, you know, if any potter wants to learn anything, I'm always available to help if I can, and if I need help, somebody will help me" (Participant G).

Besides learning from other more experienced potters, the participants learnt a lot from objects made by other experienced potters. When the participants worked with materials through their hands and body, there was a continually exchanged subjectivity between materials and potters (Li *et al.*, 2025). Pots made by the participants conceived the specific entanglement of the potter with materials and tools. Through looking at different handmade pots, potters learnt the different ways working with materials and tools. It was also a specific way of learning from others: "I don't use my own pots. If I use my own pots, I can only communicate with myself every day. So, I buy other potters' functional pots and use them. Then I can communicate with other potters, I can have a conversation with different people, that's learning from other people" (Participant N).

Online tools, like YouTube, and television programs provide a medium for communication and have become more important for potters to teach and learn. Participant N and K, set up the camera to show the making process, record their body movements, and upload the videos online. In this way, they did not need to be physically close to a learner to demonstrate their body movements. Potters as learners, could search these videos online and choose the one to watch to learn.

This technology has affected the space and time of pottery learning practice. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), participants started to explore the alternative way of teaching and learning craft when people were not allowed to meet each other physically. These online platforms formed a wider network to connect all potters from around the world, providing spaces for potters to communicate with and learn from each other: "I've noticed many more people offering online workshops to share their knowledge and skills in a very generous way. You know, sometimes it's a free workshop. And this is just going online, going live on Instagram, Facebook ... there are lots of these workshops that are much cheaper than if you have to travel across the world to go and visit someone and learn their skills. So, it's a very exciting time. I've been attending a lot of workshops" (Participant K).

Finally, making the decision to become a potter is no longer tied to life choices made during or after completion of schooling. Our respondents came to pottery at various points in their life course. Participant A, like many others, became interested in pottery due to a pottery short course she joined by accident, she learnt the knowledge through all different short courses with pottery experts. "It was a random decision ... I went and I just loved it, and then I started going to more and more [pottery short] courses ... I also worked with a ceramicist in Spain ... And the turning point was when I was in Italy because this was a six-week residency with a mentor and throwing six days a week. I mean 8 h a day...that's when I learned, really" (Participant A).

CONCLUSION

While formal apprenticeships in the pottery have largely disappeared, there remain viable options for learning to become a potter. These are currently largely dependent on individuals becoming part of a community of potters and learning in a wide array of modes. Formal and informal classes offered by many of the crafters, periods of time spent assisting in a master potter's workshop and using a variety of digital modes of learning create a skills ecosystem that enables craft learning. Digital technology has significantly increased the visibility of craft practice, and is fostering a new space for the development of certain craft knowledge. It affords people greater opportunities to clearly see demonstrations from experienced potters anywhere, anytime. Learners are able to develop knowledge and skills without the physical presence of teachers and masters.

However, there is a tension between craft and the use of technology. This research has also shown that developing tacit understanding of craft involves being embodied in and engaged with materials, tools, and equipment. Therefore, even though the online videos and platforms have provided a space to teach and learn from others who are not physically close with each other, it still requires the learner to touch the material and use the tools in the physical studios, where the embodied sensitivity arises. The affordance of technology could help the future discussions about the potential of the persistence and survival of craft given that the traditional craft apprenticeship has disappeared.

The case of learning pottery in a context where formal apprenticeships with associated institutional arrangements, such as college or university courses, no longer exist illuminates some of the dynamics of how craft learning can happen. The success of this skill system highlights some of the possibilities for the emergence of learning pathways that are more flexible, are not tied to qualifications and can occur at virtually any life stage. This is particularly pertinent to the growing focus on crafts as a reaction to large scale industrialized forms of production. With the benefits of media and the emergent possibilities of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, decentralized and asynchronous learning that is spatially distributed across a variety of sites is possible. However, given the tacit nature of craft knowledge and the need for opportunities to practice with materials and equipment, there remains a need for opportunities to work in close contact with other practitioners to observe aspects of their craft. This need not be as hierarchically arranged as traditional apprenticeships and can take the form of peer support.

In the case of pottery, these arrangements were put in place informally as part of a network of practitioners with little to no coordination. This may not always produce the desired opportunities, and creates risks that only insiders with access to the network, and those that have the resources to fund their training are able to access these learning pathways. The formation of modern versions of craft guilds would assist in ensuring that the coordination is more systematic, and that some consensus around the mastery of skills is achieved. Why regulation, formalization, and qualification may not be necessary in all fields, it is likely that in the longer term some formalization is likely.

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