

**Define skill in the context of your own practice
and the work of two artists/makers/designers
from the lecture series**



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Research in Context (ADAD5003)
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Word count: 2369 words

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We live in the era of the skills economy, a time when the recognition of being highly skilled can be used as a valuable means for success (Sennett, 2009, p.37). Yet, what exactly is a skill? Generically, it is defined as a trained practice, something that requires special training or manual proficiency (Collins, 2018, p. 1857). However, in the context of making, one should consider skill not as the simple, mechanical execution of a particular process, but instead as a complex dynamic mechanism arising through the careful, perceptive engagement of the practitioner with the material they work with (Ingold, 2001, p.22). Skill is a paradox, deceptively simple, yet utterly complex at the same time.

This essay is an investigation into the definition of skill from the perspective of my own craft practice, namely ceramics. It examines how skill acquisition is achieved through somatic sensory evaluation of the world, concentrating particularly on the intercommunication between the hands and the brain. It will then explore skill from the viewpoint of two ceramicists: Bernard Leach, often described as 'the father of British studio pottery' (Smith, 2020, p.14) and Michael Eden, a British potter who combines both digital and tradition hand skills to push his practice forward.

In pottery, skill acquisition is primarily founded through the bodily mimesis of the novice to the actions of the teacher. Our capacity to learn mimetically or by imitation, enhances our world view and allows us to establish a connection to the people around us. It enables the creation of practical knowledge and artistic action. The hand plays an important role in this creative process, as it grasps the incorporeal nature of a

thought and translates it into a tangible object (Pallasmaa, 2009, p.15; Wulf, 2008, p. 56). It provides the route by which creativity transverses the liminal boundary between the internal and external world.

Hands are the prehensile organs that characterise our species *Homo sapiens*. Anatomically, they extend from the end of the forearm and are comprised of carpal bones (wrist bones), metacarpal bones (the middle part of the hand, or palm) and the phalanges (finger bones). In addition, they also contain muscles, ligaments, and tendons, which enable their extensive articulation (figure 1.). Our fingers and opposable thumbs contain a hyperconcentration of nerve endings, which makes them inseparably linked to our sense of touch (Napier, 1993, p.13). Yet, aside from these generic characteristics, hands also have their own distinctive personalities, displaying engraved skin patterns of individuality and revealing the stories of entire lives.

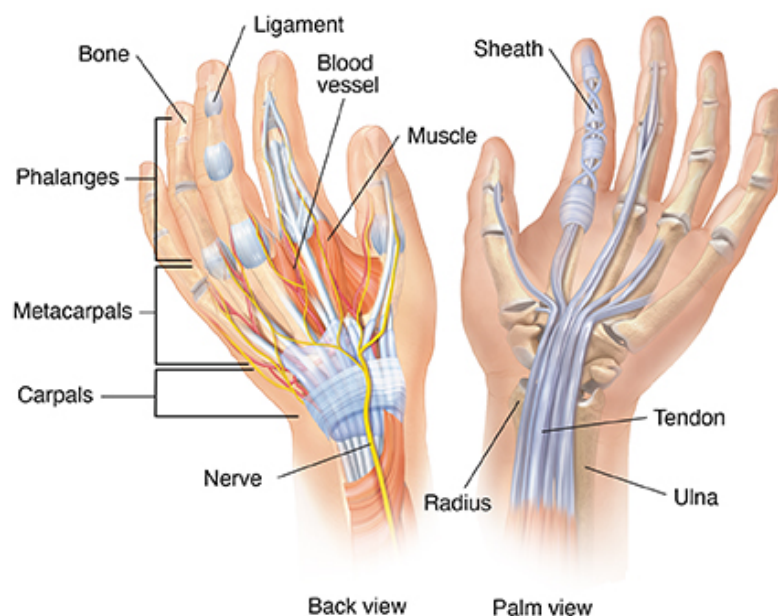


Figure 1 - Anatomy of the hand (University Hospitals, 2022)

Our hands are far more complex than the simple anatomical description given above. They function interdependently with the brain, allowing the brain to extend out into the world and gain new experiences. This synergism is so powerfully formulated, that it makes human skill difficult to define (Wilson, 1998, p.10). Thus, to understand the true nature of skill, we need to understand how the biophysical entity that a human is, engages with the environment around it (Ingold, 2001, p. 21). When a potter creates a vessel on the wheel, a complex choreography must be undertaken between the brain, body, rotating wheel, and clay, to enact the creative process and achieve the desired result. Initially, the potter must focus on centring the clay, their hands moulding its curved surface, forcing it to spin true on the wheel. As they continue to work, a frenzied exchange of visual and kinaesthetic information occurs with the brain, allowing for crucial adjustments to be made to both the position of the hands and the amount of pressure applied. Thus, underlying the seemingly effortless manner with which the potter gradually shapes the clay, is a complex tacit knowledge that they cannot access or express, and is learnt purely through observation, imitation, and practice (Malafouris, 2008, p. 19). This example illustrates how skill is embodied as a rhythmic pattern of movement, (Ingold, 2001, p.24) with the potter responding subtly to perceived modulations in the clay.

When learning to throw, the novice's skill slowly develops through gradual attunement of their perception and movement. From my own experience, I found I was initially heavy handed in my practice, moving my hands awkwardly into new positions, unsure of the pressure required to manipulate this new material. I also found it easier to close my eyes, so that I could concentrate on the feeling of the material and the instructions I had been given (figure 2).

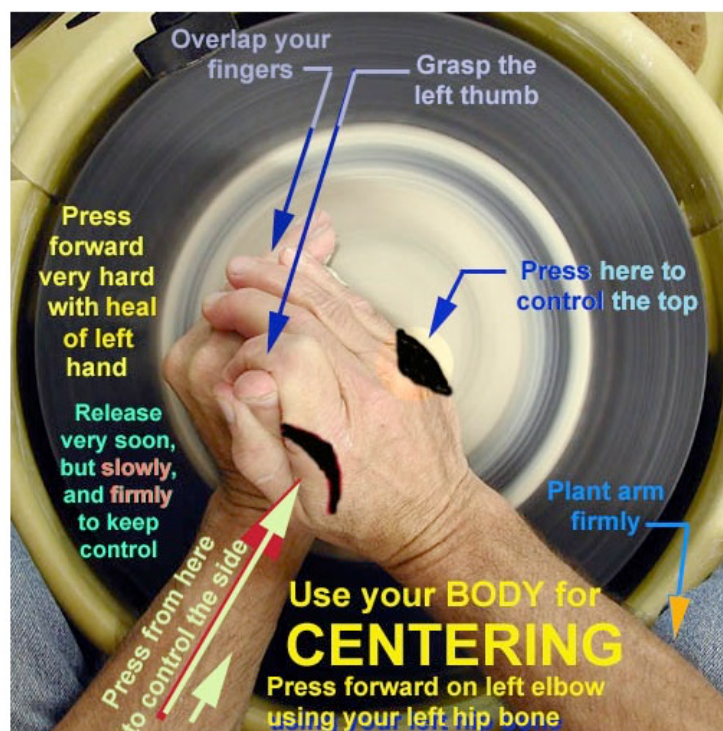


Figure 2 – Overview of how to centre clay on a wheel (Alta Ceramics, 2022)

Indeed, many teachers instruct that their students do this, as it improves the development of their haptic ability (Groth *et al.*, 2022, p. 265). Eventually, with guidance, repeated practice and active engagement, the body gradually learns to fine tune its movements and to work with the clay. So paradoxically, although the novice has no conscious awareness of all the somatic processes involved in learning to throw, they eventually achieve the rhythmic fluency of the skilled maker (Ingold, 2001, p.24; Malafouris, 2008, p. 21). Yet this cannot be seen as the end point, the culmination of their practice, as their skill will be constantly challenged each time they sit down at the wheel.

Tacit knowledge was first postulated by the philosopher Michael Polanyi, who stated that “*we can know more than we can tell*” and that we are constantly observing things with multiple layers of awareness. For example, although we can recognize a familiar face amidst a multitude of strangers, we would struggle to sufficiently explain how we recognize them (Polanyi, 2009, p. 4). In the context of handcrafts, where often a skill cannot be specified in detail, the only way knowledge can be passed on from teacher to novice is by example. In this process, the novice must trust in their teacher’s methodology and surrender themselves uncritically to their imitation. Through watching and emulating what is being taught, the novice embodies rules of the process, including the subtle nuances which may be unknown to the teacher themselves (Polanyi, 1962, p.55). Yet, how does the novice decide which aspects of the teacher’s behaviour to emulate, and which are incidental? This is dictated primarily by emotional intelligence, together with constraints in the material, technique, task goals and time. All of which guide the novice to coordinate their practice according to what is achievable within a given situation (Groth, 2022, p 226; Malik, 2021, p 633; Milton and DeDeo, 2022, p 8). The teacher’s intervention is also important, as it guides the novice, reinforcing the learning process and cultivating their future practice.

The ceramicist Bernard Leach described pottery “as having its own language and inherent laws” and thus required a certain amount of translation and interpretation if the skills and methods used by potter were to be understood (Leach, 1991, p. xxi). Leach was born in 1887 and spent his early years living in Japan and Hong Kong, before being sent to school in England. He then went on to study art, first at the Slade School of Art, and then London School of art, where he studied etching. In 1909, Leach returned to Japan where he was introduced to the art of Raku at a pottery party.

Through this experience, he became bewitched by the firing process and decided to take up ceramics. Leach became an apprentice to the renowned traditional Japanese pottery master Urano Shigekichi, learning the art of traditional brushwork and different firing methods. Upon returning to the UK in 1920, he joined the Guild of Handicrafts in St Ives and went on to establish the Leach Pottery. Here, he taught pottery using a combination of Western and Eastern artistic philosophy, amalgamating traditional Japanese pottery with the European techniques such as slipware (figure 3) (Leach, 1991, p. xiv; Leach Pottery, 2022; Smith, 2020, p. 46).

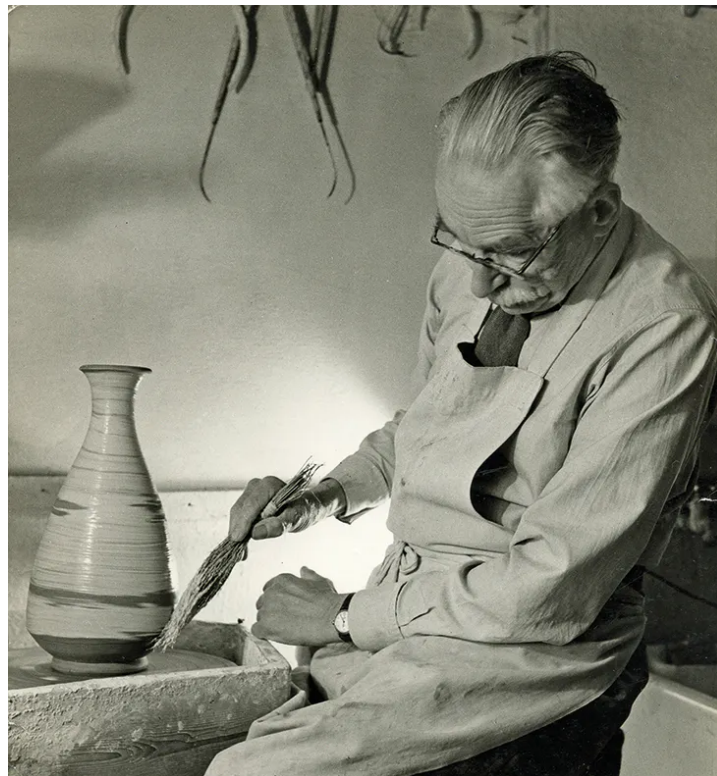


Figure 3 – Bernard Leach working at the wheel. (Apollo, 2020)

In contrast to the European artistic taste, the Japanese embraced any imperfections left on a newly thrown object, and accidental irregularities in glaze or form were often accentuated. Leach found an authenticity in traditional hand-built forms, where the maker has gone against the constraint of their mimetic teaching, in favour of their own impulses and intuition, leading to originality and objects that have more personal meanings. He valued skill and intuition, and felt that utilitarian mass-produced pottery, could never possess the same intimate humanistic qualities as that created by the co-operation of the hand and undivided personality of an intuitive potter. Pots, he felt, were a form of human expression; tangible projections of the thoughts of their creator (Leach, 1991, p. 2; Palmer, 2005, p.102). Indeed, I find this to be true, as the pieces I make often reflect my mood at the time.

Through the continued influx of apprentices to his studio, Leach found that the people attracted to hand crafts were no longer those willing to submit themselves to the accumulated knowledge of tradition, but rather free-thinking art students, who stayed briefly and left before they had developed an intimate relationship with their material or proved themselves artistically. He felt that this was leading to a decline in skills, as it was important that the apprentice develop an embodied and tacit knowledge of the clay, the unification of which culminated in the creation of an aesthetically evolving pot (Leach, 1991, p. 11; Tyas, 2023). Leach advocated a new relationship between the public and the potter, one which revealed the closely guarded 'secrets' of the pottery tradition, and through knowledge, allowed the public to better understand artistic aims and technical skill of the maker. By developing this idea in conjunction with his pluralistic ideas and philosophy, he played an important role in the creation of the studio pottery ethos. A culture which rejected factory ceramics, in favour of small-

scale handmade creations, made by a single artisan or small workshop (Leach, 1991, p. xix). This ethos gave potters more freedom to use their skill and intuition to follow different paths and to create items with an intrinsic, humanistic beauty.

The emergence of new, innovative approaches in contemporary ceramic design and production (such as Computer Aided Design (CAD) and 3D printing technology) has presented makers with endless opportunities to develop new processes, leading to a new ceramic visual language and aesthetic. However, it has also led many to question whether this new era heralds a decline in traditional making skills and the ‘humanness’ of the craft (Chittenden, 2018, p.9). Technologies such as 3D printing, change the way the creative process occurs and have started to remove the maker’s hand from directly engaging with their material. Yet, some ceramicists, such as Michael Eden, are embracing this technology and using it to push their practice forward into new territory (figure 4).



Figure 4 – *Á Rebours* by Michael Eden (2009)

Michael Eden, worked as a successful studio potter for 20 years, before undertaking a Master of Philosophy degree at the Royal College of Art. During this time, he investigated how he could combine new digital design and manufacturing processes with his embedded pottery skills to take his practice in a new direction (Hoskins, 2019, p.72). Eden describes himself as a creator, exploring the amorphous grey area where art, craft, and design intersect. His practice is simply focused on making something with skill, regardless of whether it is with the potter's wheel or the 3D printer, as they all have their place and require a certain level of skill to be utilized well (Eden, 2003, p. 127). Through his work, he invites discussion around the territories of each discipline, culminating in the 'craft of the digital' – whereby although digital manufacturing is removing the hands-on element to this process, and the tacit knowledge that it brings. Without this tacit knowledge and the deep understanding of the materials you are using, it is impossible to create anything skilfully in 3D (Hoskins, 2019, p. 73). This demonstrates that a very different way of thinking is required, to enable the digital divide to be crossed.

Eden has learnt adapt his problem-solving skills, to suit the process. Working with clay is a very open-ended, as combining different materials and techniques can lead to very different results. In contrast to this, working in the digital medium can be far more rigid, so if an element of the data file is wrong, or the syntax incorrect, it simply will not print (Eden, 2003, p 129). Creating the digitally removes some of the constraints that occur when hand working clay on the wheel, and allows the communication of new ideas, using previously impossible forms. By blurring the boundaries between the two technologies Eden hopes to forge a new ceramic language (Eden, 2003, p.131). Yet, despite these positive aspects, a certain amount

of the hidden dialogue between the maker and his material will be lost in this language, as digitally printed ceramics do not display the subtle emotional hints of the hands that made them.

This essay set out to define skill in terms of my own ceramic practice, a task which has shown that, underlying the effortless grace with which a potter may create a vessel, is a complex and largely unconscious somatic process, of which the alliance between the hands and the brain of the potter is intrinsic to the embodiment of this tacit knowledge.

From the perspective of Bernard Leach, the increasing mass production of utilitarian ceramics was causing the skill and intuition of the potter to be lost. To reverse this process, he advocated revealing some of the secret techniques and processes that a potter used when he created a vessel. That way, the public would better understand the processes and skill required, and interest in the artisan potter would be renewed

Michael Eden has embraced new technological advancements in his practice, amalgamating both digital skills and hand build skills in his work, believing that these skills can sit side by side in a newly developing artistic discipline.

I don't think skill will ever completely be defined, as much of what we learn is achieved at an unconscious level, in ways that we cannot recall. Skill isn't just the mechanical repetition of a single task, it is a holistic experience, the sensory unification of a potter with their clay.

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Figures:

Figure 1: University Hospitals (2022) *Anatomy of the hand*
Available at: <https://www.uhhospitals.org/health-information/health-and-wellness-library/article/adult-diseases-and-conditions-v0/anatomy-of-the-hand>

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Figure 2: Alta Ceramics (2022) *Overview of how to centre clay on a wheel*
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Figure 3: Apollo International Art Magazine (2020) *Bernard Leach working at the wheel*.

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Figure 4: Michael Eden (2009) *Á Rebours* [Additive Layer Manufacturing of nylon, coated in a non-fired ceramic].

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