

Modeling Clay – for All Ages?

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We continue this [artistic working in the early grades] by moving on to three-dimensional, plastic forms, using plasticine if it is available and whatever else we can get if it isn't—even if it's mud from the street, it doesn't matter! The point is to develop the ability to see forms [*Formanschauen*] and feel forms [*Formgefuehl* = Form-Feeling]¹

Invigorating street mud

In the quote cited above, Rudolf Steiner points out that the main purpose of pedagogical modeling is for teachers to make a start and have their students activate their hands regularly in creating forms. The forming and form-sensing activity is paramount, regardless of the malleable material used—“even street mud if it is the only thing available, it doesn't matter!” Elsewhere he calls street mud “a very good material” for this important purpose.²

Observation of young children playing for lengthy times shaping cool, wet mud or sand or cold snow shows us what a primal impulse sculptural activity is for human beings. Our hands want to reshape and transform the earth.

Plentiful earth materials like sand, dirt, and clay lend themselves naturally and readily to modeling activity outdoors and indoors. Hella Loewe, a long-time Waldorf class teacher, found that clay is a wonderfully malleable material and ideal for engaging and invigorating children in the early grades. Her boisterous class developed a passion for their weekly modeling lessons and was harmonized by them. Following each session, she saw “with pleasure how my children developed healthy, ruddy cheeks; even the delicate, pale ones appeared rosy and stimulated.”³

Clay for first and second grades

Steiner emphasized the artistic value of young children “handling clay” and even “struggling with [such] outer materials.” Their exertion helps them develop willpower and connect actively with the world. In his words:

...Whatever subject is being taught, the child's inherent impulse to play, which is an intrinsic part of his or her makeup, can be guided into artistic activities. And when children enter the first and second grades, they are perfectly able to make this transition. However clumsy children of six or seven may be when modeling, painting, or finding their way into music and poetry, if teachers know how to permeate their lessons with artistry, even young children as miniature sculptors or painters can begin to have the experience that human nature does not end at the fingertips, that is, at the periphery of the skin, but flows out into the world. The adult being is growing in children whenever they put their being into handling clay [*Ton*], wood, or paints. In these very interactions with materials, children grow, learning to perceive how closely the human being is interwoven with the fabric of the world. These [artistic channels] permit a freedom of inner activity while at the same time forcing the children to struggle with outer materials, as we have to do in adult work.⁴

Waldorf teachers should note specially that, in the quote above, Steiner is speaking of first and second graders modeling with clay.

Choosing other useful materials

In addition to mud, clay, and wood, Steiner also refers to wax and plasticine as suitable modeling materials. (He himself invented his own mixture of plasticine—although not for school purpose—and created numerous architectural models and figures out of it, some quite large.) Caroline von Heydebrand (1886–1938), one of the twelve founding class teachers in the first Waldorf school who practiced modeling and the use of beeswax in her classroom, poignantly described its pedagogical implications:

Just as the young child digs and plays in his sand pile or in the earth, making little men and animals or baking mud pies, so a little later does the older child occupy his creative imagination with more permanent materials. The nearer he approaches the change of teeth, the more markedly do the formative forces reveal themselves—since their activity in this change of teeth is now, as it were, concluded—in the impulse the child feels to use his creative powers of soul in fashioning forms, in painting, and in modeling. And just as the child Jesus [according to legend] was happy when he made his cuckoo-birds out of the moist, clayish earth which he found in the lanes where he played, and with which he made them look alive as he patted them into shape, so is the other child now satisfied also if he has a bit of loam or clay which he finds perhaps near at hand. If only he can make something, he will look for his material till he finds it. On the other hand, if his parents can give him beeswax, for example, to model with, then in the very act of kneading this noble material, his creative will—working as it does in the circulation of the blood and warming his hands till they are all aglow—makes itself felt even to the very tips of his fingers. Thus not only is the

skillfulness of his hands increased, but his imaginative capacity is also aroused and nurtured. For we know how similarly the movements and gestures of both hands and feet react when the child is learning to speak: how they help him to learn, to form ideas, and to think. . . . In his play, first of all, is the child's creative activity developed. Later, it shows itself in his happy enjoyment, his eagerness to recreate in his own way the beauty of the world. . . . The road lead[s] from a healthy, wisely-directed play-impulse in childhood to a consciously dutiful activity in mature life.⁵

Similarly, Cecil Harwood (1898–1975), a founding teacher of the first Waldorf school in the English-speaking world, characterized the child's early desire to shape objects with the hands as a profoundly organic, artistic need:

[Young children] need all the more to be given artistic food because the desire is still, so to speak, organic. Look at the imagination of children, their make-believe games, their wide-eyed love of stories, their uncontrollable desire to paint and draw, the itching of their fingers to shape and model, even if they have no better material than dirty clay from a backyard garden, or wax pulled fearfully from the melting wall round the candle flame. . . . Painting, modeling, acting, rhythmical movement—these must become for these young children the very way of knowledge. If you succeed in teaching in this way, you are uniting what is nowadays divided—the forces of the head with the forces of feeling and movement. You are strengthening the binding point of thought and feeling and will.⁶

Michael Howard, a sculptor who has worked extensively with Waldorf teachers and teachers in training, encourages them

to appreciate the particular capacities that different materials stimulate in children and to avoid prejudging the suitability of materials:

Teachers who have the children model are to be commended, whatever the material and method they employ. However, since most teachers are not sculptors, they are understandably grateful for any indications that give them direction. In Waldorf schools there is a prevailing view that from pre-school up through grade three children should model with beeswax. Promoting the merits of beeswax typically includes the judgment that clay should not be used with young children because it is harmful to them. The explanation commonly given is that the cold, wet clay robs the children's forces.

If this is the case, we may well ask if it is harmful for young children to play in puddles, streams, wet sand, mud, snow and the cold water from the sink. Playing with such materials can be messy and thus can cause some inconvenience, but I have never heard anyone say they are harmful. Quite the opposite, it is generally regarded as normal and healthy. If there is any reason for concern, it is surely in regard to those children who avoid playing with materials such as sand and snow. One finds the same healthy delight and creative play in a group of children mucking out in a natural clay pit as in a sandbox.

Such observations alone are reason enough to be wary of the view that clay is inappropriate or harmful in the early years. Those who do not trust their own experience about the healthy nature of clay modeling may look to Rudolf Steiner for the definitive insight. Research by colleagues both in Europe and America has thus far found not one statement

from Steiner that hints at harmful effects of clay at any age.

I raise the issue of clay modeling for two reasons. As a sculpture teacher I feel called to challenge what seems an unfounded dogmatism in my realm of activity. But the use of clay is not the real issue. More significantly, it serves as an example where vigilance is called for. If we recognize a dogmatic mindset creeping into one or two areas of our educational work, however minor in itself, is it not likely that there are others? The issue I raise is the threat posed by a dogmatic mindset per se, where in the name of "best practice" any principle or method is fixed into the one-right-way. The reason we should be alert to even minor expressions of a dogmatic stance is because as a soul gesture it is the polar opposite of what makes education an art. To judge clay as harmful is to short-circuit a possibly creative pedagogical activity. Instead of judging clay as good or bad, we might ask ourselves: What does each material—beeswax, clay, sand, mud, wood, wool—offer for the development of different capacities? If our inner gesture is experientially open rather than conceptually closed, we open ourselves to appreciate the potential of one material to engage one aspect of human nature while another material may best be used to exercise another capacity.⁷

Clay for early childhood activity

Elizabeth Grunelius, one of the early pioneering kindergarten teachers in the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, gave enthusiastic endorsement for the use of clay with young children and advice on how to orchestrate modeling with kindergartners:

Another general [kindergarten] activity is work with clay. . . . First thing in the morning the children help to push their

tables together and spread a large oilcloth over them. Then they distribute the boards, one to each place, and bring a good-sized lump of clay for each board. The children can hardly wait to plunge their hands into the plastic material and to start forming it. Sometimes the teacher will set to work too, and the children can see how he handles the material. Occasionally the forms of animals—a horse, a cow, a little goat, a duck or even an elephant or a giraffe—will emerge, and the children will immediately want to have them and play with them. Of course the children will be free to watch the teacher or follow their own incentives.

In clay work, as in painting, the results are not made the subject of discussion or comparative analysis; the work is placed on a shelf for the rest of the morning, and after the children have gone home, a few pieces of special interest are selected and kept, while the remainder of the clay goes back into the container.⁸

Further experiences with clay

For me clay with the right moisture is the quintessential, archetypal earth medium for modeling at all ages 3 to 103+. It gives way to hand pressure with just the right resistance and at the same time holds its form wonderfully. Clay's water-permeated texture becomes almost magically flesh-like in feel and look. It is no wonder many ancient cultures associated it with the creation of the human being!

Clay also lends itself to handling good-sized pieces and “whole-hand modeling.” All parts of the threefold hand can be fully engaged in the process: concave palm (feeling), fingers (thinking/nerve sense), and the lower, very muscular base before the wrist and muscular thumb (will).

The children in my three class groups in the Waldorf school (1977–1998) loved our weekly clay exercises and special main lesson projects—a whole adobe village—and always

Khnum the Moulder, the Ram-Headed God, shaped human beings and all flesh, modeled the gods, and fashioned the world egg on his potter's wheel.

–Egyptian Mythology

And God formed the human being of the clay of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...

–Genesis

Wise Prometheus modeled human beings out of river clay and in the shape of the gods. He desired fire for his creations.

–Greek Mythology

tackled them with gusto. In past years, I have been invited into the first and second grade to give occasional clay modeling lessons. Today's children are eager and in need of taking up this therapeutically-resistant substance of Mother Earth and imaginatively and passionately transforming it. They find it exciting to be modeling pure geometric forms just as they love to make two-dimensional ones in their form drawing lessons. And, of course their hands are always “full of” animals, people, and dwellings!

Warming beeswax

I have also conducted countless exercises and projects in grades 1–5 with colored beeswax to the delight of the children. Beeswax, however, is hard and stiff at first and can offer uncomfortable resistance for young children. There are ways to pre-warm the material so that it becomes as malleable as clay. Children can hold it between their warm hands for many minutes while one tells a story or they can put it down their shirts, “into the oven” on their stomachs. Sometimes we put pieces on the windowsill in the sun or on the radiator, watching out that it does not become too soft or melt outright!

In this connection, Hanne Huber, an experienced kindergarten teacher, has published a wonderful action research book

Gestalten mit Bienenwachs im Vorschulalter [Modeling with Beeswax in the Preschool Age]. This manual is sumptuously illustrated with pictures of figures that kindergartners as little builders have constructed out of pieces of soft wax. (It is valuable even for those who do not read German.) Frau Huber describes how children can soften beeswax in a warm-water bath at hand temperature or how the teacher can place it in the oven at 122 degrees F (50 degrees C) for an hour before use. (I have also heard of a kindergarten teacher who skillfully mixed up batches of warm wax in a pot on the stove and served out soft lumps.)

Coloring beeswax?

Frau Huber also prefers to use beeswax with its natural golden color rather than a colored assortment. She found that “sculptural qualities find their fullest expression in using the *one* natural color.”⁹ The emphasis is then primarily on the form experience rather than combining it with an experience of color, which is left to the painting lesson, in which form becomes secondary or even relatively non-existent. Sculptor Michael Howard agrees:

Often the beeswax that is used for modeling is brightly colored. Children and teachers alike may find these colors cheerful and fun, for example, a gnome with a red shirt, blue pants, and a green hat with a yellow feather. What are the pedagogical issues a teacher might consider regarding the color of beeswax? If we want the children to have a *color* experience, we have them paint. When painting they do not sculpt, they do not give three-dimensional form to the pigment. If we want them to have a form experience, we should help them focus on forming the clay or beeswax. In giving them colored beeswax we are distracting them from a full *form* experience; we are asking them to paint while they are sculpting. Put another way, using brightly colored beeswax stimulates

the sense-nerve will. If our pedagogical intent is to develop the feeling-will through sculptural forming, then we would use clay or beeswax that has a simple earth tone.¹⁰

Fingering beeswax

I also experience that beeswax modeling tends to emphasize the nerve sense pole in the use of the fingertips rather than the palm and muscular base of the hand. With clay one can shape out the whole mass of a piece with the whole hand and then proceed to detailing with fingers and tips as a final stage. Doing a lot of beeswax modeling I find can neglect whole-hand modeling and using the fullest potential of our hands' plasticity. Beeswax modeling tends toward what I would call a kind of fine motor, intellectual “picky-ness.” Children can become caught up prematurely with fine details rather than first artistically capturing the primal gesture of a subject. Of course, beeswax can be very helpful for a child who needs to improve fine motor skills, but perhaps that is better achieved through handwork and sewing. (As another perspective, a European Waldorf art teacher of decades' experience visited the United States recently and remarked that he was astounded at how often beeswax was emphasized in American schools and teacher workshops. “We never did it like that!” he exclaimed.)

In my opinion, teachers need to continuously evaluate their repertoire of arts and methods for a variety and balance of capacities. Michael Howard gives an example of such an ongoing assessment process applied to the two media we have been discussing:

We might discover that certain materials are best suited for sense-nerve activity while other materials lend themselves better to feeling-will activity. If we determine that we need to exercise their sense-nerve will, or what is commonly called head/hand coordination, then beeswax is well suited. The inclination

to make recognizable objects—bowls, birds, and so forth, but especially, the fine fingertip manner of forming small shapes in wax, engages the sense-nerve will. If on the other hand we wish the children to exercise their feeling-will, clay is particularly suitable. Clay can naturally be used in larger quantities that invite whole hand movements. This in turn allows the students to focus more on feeling the quality of the forms rather than on conceptual associations.¹¹

Plasticine magic mirrors and spontaneous hand dexterity

An interesting medium whose qualities lie between clay and beeswax is plasticine, an earthen material mixed with a non-toxic binder. This material can be costly in comparison to clay and does not lend itself to making large pieces. It can, however, be used over and over. I found a variety of earth-colored brown plasticine that responded more readily to simple hand warmth than beeswax but did not become too soft to retain forms.

My students in the lower grades each flattened two walnut-sized lumps of plasticine into two thin, round “magic mirrors” out of which all kinds of forms could emerge. They stored these in a plastic zip bag in their desks. At a moment’s notice I could have students bring forth the pieces for quick warming between the palms and for spontaneous modeling and often just short exercises. With a word such as “sphere” or “bird” from me, hands launched into action. After the children held up what they had produced, they reverently curled the form into a rounded lump, smoothed its edges, and then flattened it into a magic mirror for future use. Needless to say, my children became very dexterous and flexibly creative over time. Their hands could spontaneously “speak forth” quick forms at a moment’s notice, even as part of the warm-up section of a main lesson.

Daily, brief, hand exercises with plasticine serve nicely as the forerunners to a much more

formal weekly modeling lesson with clay, which requires more preparation and time.¹²

Endnotes

1. Rudolf Steiner, “Second Curriculum Lecture,” in *Discussions with Teachers* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1997), p. 198.
2. Rudolf Steiner, *Kingdom of Childhood*, Lecture 6 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995), pp. 93–94.
3. Hella Loewe, “Modeling in the Early Grades,” Arthur Auer, translator, *Bund Rundbrief*, Nr.70, November 2000. Frau Loewe’s initial articles evolved and were expanded wonderfully into a manual entitled *Basic Sculptural Modeling: Developing the Will by Working with Pure Forms in the First Three Grades* (Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA Publications, 2006).
4. Rudolf Steiner, “Education and Art,” in *Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy*, Volume 2, Lecture 3 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996), pp. 58–59.
5. Caroline von Heydebrand, *The Child at Play* (London: Anthroposophic Publishing, 1928), card covers, pp.17–20.
6. A.C. Harwood, *The Way of a Child* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1997), p. 32.
7. Michael Howard, *Educating the Will* (Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA Publications, 2004), pp. 37–39.
8. Elizabeth Grunelius, *Early Childhood Education and the Waldorf School Plan* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 1991), pp. 18–19.
9. Hanne Huber, *Gestalten mit Bienenwachs im Vorschulalter [Modeling with Beeswax in the Preschool Age]* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2001), p. 9.
10. Op. cit. Howard, p. 40.
11. Ibid., p. 39.
12. *Learning about the World through Modeling: Sculptural Ideas for School and Home* by Arthur Auer, MEd. (AWSNA Publications, 2001). For more perspectives and tips, see the chapters on: Choice of Materials, Beeswax, Clay and Water, Practical Aspects, Rudolf Steiner’s Advice, Summary of Suggestions, In Touch with Our Hands, Hand Movements in Space and Matter.

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