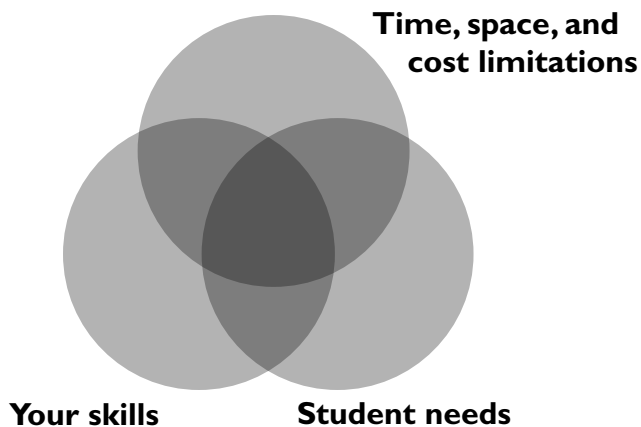


How to Devise a Curriculum

This Teachers Resource handout is made available free by the PMC Guild, a members organization with a mission to support teaching and innovation in with Precious Metal Clay.

I. Determine the appropriate scale and subject

A good class is one in which the skills of the teacher, the needs of the students, and the situation all agree. Or to say it another way, it is not just about what you want to teach, but what the students want to learn, and what is realistic for the time and place you have available. It might be helpful to think of it as three overlapping spheres.



The ideal spot is where all three circles overlap. If only two overlap, this might still work out, but you're facing an uphill battle, such as pushing the limit of your students' skills or attention level. Just be forewarned.

II. Determining what you will teach

This is a more deliberate and formal process than you might think. It requires pencil, paper, and some dedicated concentration time. Sit down and make a list of what you want to accomplish. Each item on the list must be specific and at least somewhat "prove-able." For instance, it would be nice to say, "Learn modeling techniques," but how will you know if you've accomplished this? It is better to write down something like "Be able to model a recognizable shape like a dog or a tree."

This list will be longer in some cases than others. In some cases it will involve only techniques, and in others it might get into issues like design, marketing, or teaching. That's one of the benefits of making this list—it forces you to think through in advance what you want to cover.

While you're making your list, you might also find it helpful to note what you are not covering. From this objective vantage, you have a clear idea about what parts go together and what you can accomplish in this class. When you come back to this list in a few months, or in the heat of the moment during class, it's easy to forget that these omissions were conscious. Of course you might find time to get into additional topics, but they should not overtake your planned curriculum.

Here is a sample list for a two-hour session with a Girl Scout troop:

What I want to cover

- How to set up a work area (plastic sheet, roller, oil, etc)
- Basic tools and what they do
- Rolling
- Making holes
- Creating textures
- Wrapping clay, adding water

Not included

- Firing
- Polishing
- Findings
- Patinas

III. Devise assignments or projects to fit the items on the list

First, what is the difference between an assignment and a project? A project is a specific item that will be the focus of the class. It is assumed that everyone came with the understanding that this is what they will make. An assignment is less specific, and generally requires more time. An example of a project is “An oval pendant with a stone.” An example of an assignment is “Make a wearable object with an interior space.” Generally the goal of a project is a finished object with instruction as a by-product. Assignments are usually more concerned with individual design choices, experimentation, and artistic development. It’s worth noting that projects generally involve less risk for the students because you have already designed a piece that looks good. Assignments offer the chance for wildly successful individual expression, but they can also lead to frustration. It might be compared to heading out on a drive—some people want to have a map and a clear idea of their destination. Others are willing to trust their instincts, realizing that they might stumble upon something special or they might waste their time driving in circles.

The key here is to be clear, first in your own mind, and then with your students. You can have a great class in both styles, but if half of your group wants one thing and the other half is expecting something else, you’ll be run ragged and the students are likely to be disappointed.

IV. Determine the goals of the class

Again, this sounds easy, but it deserves careful attention. Probably all teachers would say their goals are to share technical information, to convey design ideas, to create a pleasant project, and to see that students have a good time. A terrific class will do all that, but what happens when these ideas run into a collision? When you don’t have time to fit all that into the timeframe, what gets put aside? An example comes up when a teacher is forced to make the difficult decision to either provide abbreviated information or to send students home with unfinished projects. This is always

tough, but you will do yourself a favor if you have a clear idea of the answer before the class even starts. If you have determined (and made clear in your description) that this is primarily a technical workshop, then you will devote whatever time is needed to delivering that information. If the goal is to send students home with a charm for Mothers Day (and it's tomorrow), you'll know that you need to rush through the technical parts to be sure the work gets finished.

V. Testing the curriculum

Once you have figured out the projects that are going to fit your class needs, you need to make the projects, at least twice. Pay attention to the tools you use, the sequence of steps, and the time it takes. If your students are beginners, double the time, at least. Not only will you be talking (which takes time), but they will be tentative in their movements, pausing to wait for instructions, and shy about working beside strangers. If you can make a piece in 20 minutes, you should allow an hour for the class to handle the same project.

Making the project several times has a couple advantages. For one, you end up with several samples that can be passed around the group while you are teaching. For another, you are more likely to run into a problem with the project. It's very helpful to be forewarned of difficulties, and it's reassuring to students when you can say, "Yeah, that happened to me, and here's how I solved the problem."

A word of caution: You need to be ready to veto a project at this stage. It is tempting to commit to a project or assignment before testing, but this defeats the purpose of the test. It can happen that the project turns out to be more difficult than you envisioned, for instance, and if this is the case, you need to be ready to put it aside and start over. Of course it might be a great project for another workshop, but take another look at the overlapping circles to be certain that you're on target.

VI. Evaluations

While not specifically a curriculum issue, having a good evaluation form will help you become a better teacher – and this includes curriculum design. Here are a few guidelines:

- Don't ask about things you can't change.
- Don't ask about things you won't change.
- Try not to ask leading questions.
- Help the students be concise.
- Be consistent from one class to the next.

Besides helping you, the evaluation form can help students digest and summarize their experience. I've had students who started to complain that a class was too technical, only to change their mind when they realized that this was exactly what they came for. They might have been frustrated that they didn't do better, and at first they saw this as a flaw in the class, but filling out the evaluation helped them to see the situation more objectively. Another benefit of the evaluation form is that it provides people with a chance to contribute to your developing skills, and most people like to be asked for their suggestions.