

*Apprenticing Ourselves to M. C. Richards: Three
Teachings for Art Educators*

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It is difficult to write about the late Mary Caroline (“M.C.”) Richards without seeming hopelessly nostalgic. Richards (1916-1999) wrote, sculpted, and taught in a variety of educational settings, including K-12 education, universities, and community workshops for learners across the lifespan. Judging from recent audiences of Black Mountain College Museum conferences, Richards has been enduringly admired by art students, artists, poets, and educators alike. Her participation at Black Mountain College (a short-lived artistic laboratory for the arts from 1933–1957) represented her departure from the traditional university system and includes experiences as a teacher, student, poet, and potter. Black Mountain catalyzed her work toward a philosophy of creativity and living. Her legacy in clay and words powerfully connect pottery and poetry with practices of the studio, the classroom, the home, and the natural world.

Richards’ iconic 1969 book, “Centering In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person,” is a beloved underground classic among pottery students and students of education. Often library copies can be found dog-eared, lovingly annotated, and printed with the eager fingerprints of other readers. M.C. Richards (1989) centrally offers artists the hidden insight so many of us come to cherish: “it is not the pots we are forming, but ourselves” (p. 13). So too, the 2003 documentary “M. C. Richards: The Fire Within” has ignited the hearts of many teachers who are also ceramicists. This short essay attempts to honor her through three lessons of her writings and teachings. Perhaps we all might consider her a teacher and mentor from a distance and across time “M.C. Richards: The Fire Within.”

Lesson 1: The Value of Sustained Interdisciplinary Engagement to Creative Endeavor

Richards' communal work was not bound to books, clay studios, or schools, though it originated from and deeply impacts all three. She centrally described the educational philosophy derived her experiences as an "interdisciplinary study" and "search for wholeness . . . through the ordeals of life" (1973, p. 157). Her renaissance approach to life and art was also a quest "to integrate poetry, pottery, inner development, community, and education" (p. 3). The philosophical was always linked with the personal for her. Richards' writings defy disciplinary boundaries, and her work with clay was equally unconventional. While many studio potters decry the brightly colorful glazes that are more commercially popular in favor of earthier celadons and shino glazes, Richards incorporated vibrant painting into her art workshops with clay, practiced meditations on color, and authored a book of poems and paintings celebrating the imagination through the color yellow.

Richards synthesized seemingly disparate philosophies and media in community spaces. Richards even exhibited her paintings alongside her poems and pottery, using many media to express linked meanings. Rather than focusing solely on Black Mountain College created in rebellion to established systems of universities and the art gallery world, Richards sought to bring meaning wherever she was through many different artistic forms. Black Mountain College itself was a richly interdisciplinary endeavor in the arts, with collaborations in dance, music, poetry, and visual arts. Richards once intended to write a sort of history of Black Mountain, and she has been theorized as someone who took the generosity and freedom of Black Mountain with her into other spaces (Thomas, 2019). Her enduring focus on possibility and multiplicity can be powerful for us to consider. As Richards (1989) observed, "Life leads us at a certain moment to step beyond the dualisms to which we have been educated". In this way, Richards (1980) also deeply engages our needs for individuality and communality in an embrace of contradiction: "to enter into the world of forming . . . we wish to be fully ourselves and at the same time, as a part of a self-realization, to offer and share with others" (p. 77).

As a kind of mystic of practicality, Richards (1973) celebrated "a hidden or occult resonance in all things" (p. 150). Anticipating current educational renaissances of Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia philosophies in places like Silicon Valley, Richards (1989) mused deeply about possibilities for the artist who lives in a childlike responsiveness to rhythm, tone, color, and story. As Mary Kay Kramp (2004) observed, stories are a "connective medium for knowing . . . [and the] embodiment of an intimate relation between knower and known, between storyteller and listener, between researcher and subject" (p. 111). This connection was

the heart of practice of Richards' poetry, pottery, and pedagogy. Her poems are about earth and flesh as much as they are expressions of philosophies and metaphors.

Richards' very approach to teaching poetry in synchrony with pottery could be seen as radical and visionary. More traditionally, one philosopher when speaking of Zen and pottery recalled, "Whenever I have tried to speak to Inoue Sensei [my pottery teacher] about philosophical issues, he has usually answered with silence, or tapped his head and said 'Only pots in here'" (Beittel, 1989, p. 16). Such quietude and nonverbal practices are prevalent in my observations of K-12 ceramics classes as well as clay workshops in colleges and communities for adults. In contrast, Richards spoke extensively and composed odes to colors, concepts, and fellow ceramicists. Putting her life's work into words, she offered us the charge to be freely "ready to experiment, be creative, serve, be beautiful, be real" in her poem, "I Am Dying."

Lesson 2. The Centrality of Craftivism in Ecology and Sustainable Communities

Richards poignantly noted in her 1973 address to artists and craftspeople: "there's a connection we ought to make between what we 'profess' as creatures sensitive to form, and what we practice in community" (p. 9). After Black Mountain College, M. C. Richards and poet Paulus Berensohn again initiated interdisciplinary artists' collaborations with others at the Endless Mountain Farm. Notably, Berensohn's 1972 book, *Finding one's way with clay: Pinched pottery and the color of clay*, is inspired by his collaborations with Richards and emphasizes their shared interest in pottery as a sort of healing play. Subsequently, during the final decade of Richards' life after teaching at Black Mountain College and City University, she lived out this truth within a sustainable Camphill village community for adults, including those with minor to severe developmental delays. This community was inspired by some of the philosophies of Rudolph Steiner and focused not only on education, but also biodynamic agriculture, crafts, and communal living. Richards blended creative practices with so-called "life skills" or vocational elements that enabled participation of those with special needs.

Richards (1989) specifically emphasized both the nuance and continuity to be found in repeated actions of handcraft through a special sort of rhythm that is educative and accessible to all: "to make a lot of things alike is as exciting as to make one surprise after another . . . and of course the rewards of sustained working rhythms are marvelous" (p. 29). Sustained learning towards an artistic practice of craftsmanship is an important experiential aspect of

craft education for students with special needs and for all learners. She encouraged the creative spark in all her students, and blended inquiries of nature with craft. A continued interest in these ecological ideologies in education is reflected in “earthschooling” and “wildschooling” digital communities today.

Through her deep focus on metaphor, Richards also pointed out the underlying linguistic link between pottery and our very cells, as the Greek word for cell translates into “hollow vessel” (1973, p. 56). She noted that each living being may be viewed as a sort of “living vessel” (1980, p. 7). Richards also reminds us that our creativity should lead to deepened work in the world in service of others, asking “What is the goal of the creativity one feels — and wishes to . . . help others to develop? Is it just to make more and more pots or take more and more pictures? . . . I think that as we become more creative, we move toward a concern with social justice and compassion” (qtd in Safransky, 1989). In these myriad ways, Richards leads us to both envision and embody our visions of craft and wholeness deeply, scientifically, socially, and in our day-to-day existence.

Lesson 3. Exploring the Arts as a Practice of Building Equality

Richards was a deeply prophetic philosopher, not only in terms of craft, ecology, and poetics, but also in her advocacy for inclusivity and equality. Richards argued that “the experiences of centering, . . . through the crafts, the arts, educated perception — may foster a healing of those inner divisions which set man at war with himself and therefore with others” (1989, p. 61). Although this seems a lofty endeavor, Richards was actually proposing this sort of healing for everyone, everywhere. As she noted in an interview a decade before her death, “If you’re wanting to build a community, you don’t have to wait for some ideal situation. You can do it wherever you are” (Safransky, 1989). The enduring value of craft as a practice of creation as well as community is illuminated as a framework for our immediate individual human growth and humanitarian aims.

Richards (1980) also began to emphasize the cultural relationships engaged by ceramics and its rich history in every civilization. She has argued that working in the crafts can awaken “consciousness of materials and processes . . . of different cultures” (p. 100). In this way, rather than consume or misappropriate the cultures of others, we can begin to feel a true kinship in examining and experiencing the natural materials, creative actions, and shared uses of beautiful and functional objects in our lives. Richards (1973) added that, “the intersection between writing and handcraft seems really to lie . . . in the quality of caring . . . an ability to respond humanly” (p. 22). Her cultivations of humanity and care become central to creative expression and to building a life that was ultimately worthwhile. As she proposed, so fittingly

for our present moment: “we must carry in our soul a picture of creating little by little the vessel of our humanity” (p. 26). May we each continue this work.

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