Hold Everything: central theme of 'the vessel' provides a trans-disciplinary conceptual context and an interdisciplinary approach across contemporary craft studios

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe the pilot version of *Hold Everything,* a new course utilising a trans-disciplinary framework of a single theme to deliver layers of value from a packed, multi-disciplinary studio experience to a seemingly bottomless well of metaphorical and conceptual territory. Students eager to "make something" as a break in routine received more than they bargained for as they expanded their awareness of objects, production, and definitions of "vessel".

While handmade objects are generally valued in contemporary society, there remains a lack of awareness around materials and processes. In the first instance, this course aimed to increase exposure to ANU School of Art & Design (ANU SOA&D) craft workshops. The value of making by hand has been recognised not only as the means to the end product, but for the multiple benefits to the maker ranging from achieving a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), to personal fulfilment and development of self-identity (Korn 2014), to expanding neural networks and capacity for lateral thinking (Wilson 1998). For casual students, increased awareness of the personal value of making objects by hand was a key outcome of the course.

Students also gained an expanded notion of 'the vessel' and its omnipresence. They interrogated metaphors and concepts of the vessel through tangible encounters with clay, timber, and fabric, taking into consideration the formal, the functional, and the personal. Through this lens, objects as mundane as a wooden spoon, a ceramic cube, and a printed t-shirt provided students valuable new perspectives of themselves and the world around them.

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Introduction

This paper describes the development and pilot of a course, *Hold Everything*, as a means of quickly delivering the value of a range discipline-specific areas, aka Workshops, utilising a thematic-based, conceptual framework. The course was constructed to support the new Design degree launched by ANU SOA&D in 2017.

The school's existing curriculums reflected specialisations of material-specific Workshops and students seeking mastery of studio practice have been well-served by the immersive culture of discipline-specific majors. This specificity has long been a point of attraction for students matriculating to ANU SOA&D. Yet, there is another potential student cohort interested in something other than committing to a comprehensive and multi-year investigation into a single-discipline. It is this latter type of student—one interested in applying design strategies through engagement with material production across a range of disciplines—that was considered in developing ANU's new BDESN (Hinchcliffe & Whitelaw 2016). In developing *Hold Everything*, we sought to test a template for delivering introductory level studio engagement across several contemporary craft disciplines conceptually interlinked through a continuous theme.

While handmade objects are generally valued in contemporary society there is a general lack of awareness around how to make things, such as an opacity surrounding materials and

processes (Kalantidou 2016). From this perspective, the SOA&D Workshops, with exceptional facility and specialised academic staff across ten disciplines, have a lot to offer all ANU students. SOA&D's new cohort of Design students were being promised a hybrid curricular model in which their digital literacies would not float in a virtual arena, but would be anchored to hands-on engagements with studio-based methods of production (Hinchcliffe & Whitelaw 2016). Their interest in a cross-disciplinary studio course would be practical, catering to their need for broad exposure in order to comprehend physical characteristics and workability of many materials, as well as to be inspired by possibilities of design.

The value of making by hand is recognised not only as the means to the end product, but for the multiple benefits to the maker ranging from achieving a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), to personal fulfilment and self-identity (Korn 2014), to expanding neural networks and a capacity for lateral thinking (Wilson 1998). Students intuitively seem to know that 'making something' would be satisfying, not for pragmatic reasons as much as to fulfil a personal hankering or to do 'something different'. However, students often face the agony of indecision that comes with the intimidating myriad of offerings from ten distinct, studio-based disciplines. A cross-disciplinary, introductory level course aimed at increasing exposure of SOA&D craft workshops would presumably provide an option to those eager for a chance to make objects without having to commit to a single material.

With the existing demand for Visual Art and Design electives from undergraduates across the ANU further compounded by anticipated demand from incoming Design degree students, there was a strong impetus to develop elective courses that would deliver similar benefits as seen in existing, seminar-based interdisciplinary courses, but within a studio-based setting focussed on introductions to a range of materials and processes at a beginner level.

This paper begins with background on the Bauhaus influence on the School's Workshop structure as the context of predominantly intra-disciplinary course development, and a shift in valuing working across disciplines. The rationale for developing cross-disciplinary courses—including *Hold Everything*—is unpacked, followed by the student enrolment demographics. The next section describes the course content of *Hold Everything* including the studio modules. We conclude with anecdotal accounts and reflections on the value of the course.

Bauhaus Beginnings and Interdisciplinary Growth

For 40 years, the ANU School of Art & Design has valued and been valued for the depth of engagement offered by discipline specific "Workshops", a system first introduced in 1977 by founding director of Canberra School of Art, Udo Sellback (Agostina 2009, p.174). Sellback drew on a Bauhaus philosophy, setting up the school as a place where "both fine arts and crafts would co-exist and be taught in a Workshop setting" and the Heads of Workshops would be allowed "a degree of autonomy for each to develop within its own traditions" (Agostina 2009, p.34). SOA&D still has a strong Bauhausian reputation, holding traditional craft disciplines as equal with fine arts, preserving a broad spectrum of ten distinct disciplinary majors that embrace a studio-based delivery of skills and maker-centred contexts. This structural legacy had resulted in nearly all studio courses being written and delivered under the badge of individual workshops.

Working Across Disciplines

While the School prides itself on having maintained a full range of disciplinary specialisations, the excellence of each Workshop has historically been "intra-disciplinary" in terms of typologies described by Marilyn Stember (1991, p.4). Stember distinguished the enterprises within and across disciplines as being intra-, cross-, multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary according to the varying degrees of integrated and holistic approaches to broader more entangled research areas. She writes "While serving very useful purposes, academic disciplines create barriers that

sometimes run counter to the very intellectual purposes" of universities, particularly in fostering "the integration and synthesis of knowledge toward a more complete understanding of the whole". (1991, pp.4-5)

In recent years, ANU SOA&D lecturers have collaborated to increase the porosity of the Workshop boundaries to work into the interstitial spaces through cross-disciplinary courses. In particular, the five smaller workshops specialising in craft media identified shared disciplinary themes including but not limited to: craftsmanship, function, domestic spaces, the Studio Craft movement, design, production, as well as strong "maker" identification linked to media-specific materials and processes – this allowed the development of combined third-year major courses and a handful of electives that were untethered from specific disciplines (Whiteley, Ferris & McConchie 2014; Nicol & Rubenis 2015). These electives, all 2000 (2nd Year) and 3000 (3rd Year) level, required each student to have an existing competency with studio practice as no media-specific skills were delivered.

The value of these courses was evident to supervisors, instructors, and assessors. With a larger group of students across several workshops, the collective awareness of contexts expanded far beyond those specific to individual Workshop media. In an email, one student from *Interstudio*[1] stated:

> I think that the mix of departments really aided in [critiques] and peer reviews. . . [and] really allow[ed] for interdisciplinary interaction. . . [T]he advice I received as a textiles student from students outside my own department was often more useful and insightful than tips [I received] from those who had taken all the same classes as I had. (Bleeker 2016)

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[1] Interstudio was a 3000-level elective open to third year students majoring in any of the five Craft & Design Workshops focussed on speculative and collaborative processes.

Figure 1. Tundi-Rose Hammond 2015, *Coil Creatures*. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Student Enrolment and Experience

The 2017 Semester-1 post-census figures for the pilot of Hold Everything demonstrated a significant increase of enrolments from non-SOA&D major students into this 1000-level (1st Year) combined discipline course (Ceramics + Furniture + Textiles) when compared to enrolments across the same three single discipline courses (Ceramics or Furniture or Textiles). In Hold Everything, 62% of students were from degree programs outside SOA&D (Figure 2), in comparison to 18% of outside students in the other three introductory courses.

Student Enrolment in Hold Everything by UG Degree Program

Legend:
- Associates Degree SASDE
- Bachelor of Asia-Pacific BAPST
- Bachelor of of Archaeological Practice BAPRC
- Bachelor of Art History & Curatorship BAHCR
- Bachelor of International Relations BIR
- Bachelor of Accounting BACCT
- Bachelor of Arts BARTS
- Flexible Double Degree FDD BARTS BCOMM
- Flexible Double Degree FDD BARTS BCRIM
- Bachelor of Commerce BCOMM
- Bachelor of Finance BFINN
- Bachelor of Genetics BGENE
- Bachelor of Music BMUSI
- Bachelor of Science BSC
- Bachelor of Design BDESN
- Flexible Double Degree FDD BDESN BCOMM
- Flexible Double Degree FDD BDESN BENSU
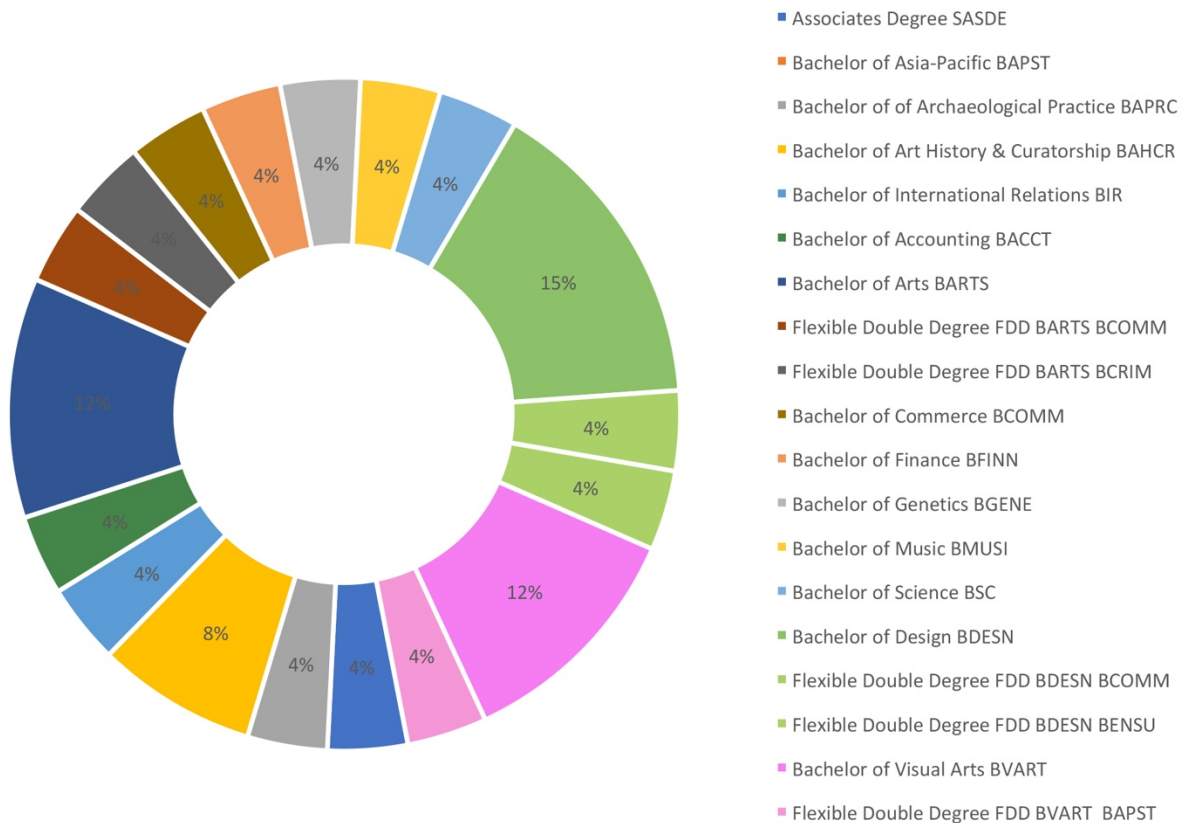- Bachelor of Visual Arts BVART
- Flexible Double Degree FDD BVART BAPST

Figure 2. *Hold Everything* Student Enrolment by ANU Degree Program, Post-Census Data, April 2017.

Prior to the offer of Hold Everything, the three single-discipline introductory courses already exhibited a trend of predominant enrolment from SOA&D degree programs, seeing 'outside' enrolments of 3% in 2014, 5% in 2015, and 14% in 2016 (Figure 3).

Comparison of Student Enrolment in Single Discipline and Combined Discipline 1000 Level Courses 2014-2017

	Number of Students in 1000s in Ceramics, Furniture, and Textiles, S-1 2014	Number of Students in 1000s in Ceramics, Furniture, and Textiles, S-1 2015	Number of Students in 1000s in Ceramics, Furniture, and Textiles, S-1 2016	Number of Students in 1000s in Ceramics, Furniture, and Textiles, S-1 2017	Number of Students in Hold Everything (Ceramics, Furniture, Textiles) 2017
■ Other Majors (Outside SOA&D)	1	2	6	6	16
■ Design Majors (BDESN, BDESA, BDIGI)	10	14	13	4	6
■ Visual Art Majors (BVART)	20	22	23	23	4

■ Other Majors (Outside SOA&D) ■ Design Majors (BDESN, BDESA, BDIGI) ■ Visual Art Majors (BVART)
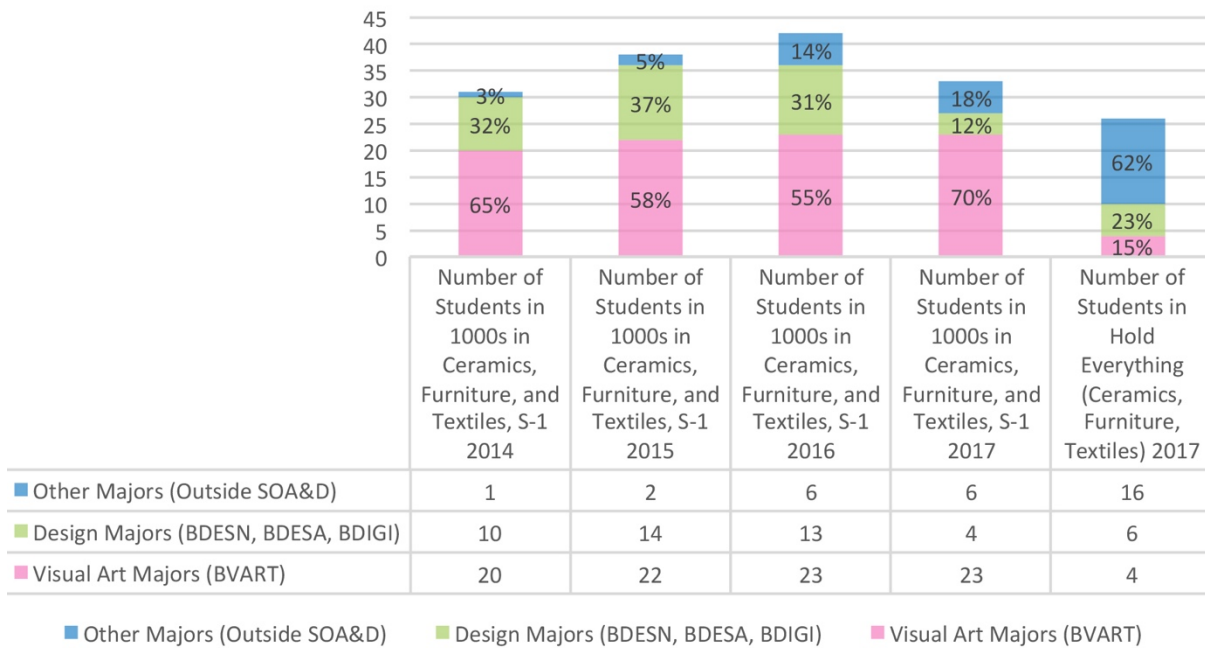
Figure 3. Enrolment Comparison of Hold Everything to 1000-level Courses in Ceramics, Furniture, and Textiles, from ANU Post-Census Data, April 2014, 2015, 2016 & 2017.

These enrolment numbers are subject to other variables and pressures, such as the single discipline courses being required for majors, who have priority enrolment, whereas the combined course had no similar restrictions. However, the dramatic uptick in 'outside' enrolments into Hold Everything demonstrates a clear demand from students outside SOA&D degree programs for studio-based engagement. It is undetermined whether the appeal to enrol stemmed from a) the thematic-based, trans-disciplinary framework of the vessel; b) the opportunity to sample several materials and methods; c) the introductory skills level; d) the access to open places on the class roster at the time of course registration; e) the informal advertising of spruiking fliers posted across campus (Figures 4 & 5), or f) a combination of these factors.

Do you still need an Elective for S-1 2017?
....

HOLD EVERYTHING!

ARTV1033//FRIDAYS 9-1

School of Art + Design

Explore a broad range of ideas regarding "the vessel"—
functional, metaphorical, aesthetic, and philosophical—
through thinking, designing, and MAKING across the
Ceramics (CLAY), Textiles (CLOTH) and Furniture
(WOOD) studios.

BEGINNERS WELCOME!

Figures 4 & 5. Promotional fliers, January 2016.

Whatever the initial motivation, students venturing outside their degree programs to "make something" in Hold Everything gained an exposure to a range of discipline specific Workshops across SOA&D, and were able to produce original, finished objects in clay, wood, and fabric. Many received more than they bargained for in their heightened awareness of objects, production, and definitions of "vessel". Time and again, in critique and assessment, students voiced their new appreciation for the work of craft, and the patience and skill required for an object to be realised. Through assigned tasks, students interrogated metaphors and concepts of the vessel through readings and reflections, as well as through tangible encounters with clay, wood, and fabric. The three modules extended the concepts with distinct perspectives: Wood investigated function and ergonomics; Textiles focussed on brand and identity; Ceramics unpacked formalism and aesthetics. Using the trans-disciplinary framework of "the vessel" as a

lens, objects as mundane as a carved wooden spoon, a ceramic cube, and a screen-printed T-shirt provided students valuable new perspectives of themselves and the world around them.

Hold Everything: Course Content

The course structure of *Hold Everything* utilised a trans-disciplinary framework of a single theme to deliver layers of value from a tightly packed, multi-disciplinary studio experience. The vessel provides particularly rich territory to mine for a broad range of applications and concepts. As explained by Lakoff and Johnsen, ontological container metaphors are intrinsic to our conceptualisations of self and surroundings:

> We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside. Rooms and houses are obvious containers . . . But even where there is no natural physical boundary that can be viewed as defining a container, we impose boundaries—marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface—whether a wall, a fence, or an abstract line or plane. There are few human instincts more basic than territoriality. (Lakoff & Johnsen 2003, p.29)

The introductory lecture proposed the invention of the vessel as an outcome of material culture accumulation and arising needs for portability or storage, and then began to unpack expanded notions. The lecture presented examples of vessels drawn from archaeology, history, myth, legend, design, and art as a functional container, a decorative object, and an ontological metaphor. Diverse objects were shown to illustrate the breadth of the category, including: an Aboriginal coolemon; Inuit kayaks; King Tutankhamun's canopic jars; Pandora's box; the Ark of the Covenant; Japanese Tansu cabinets; American hope chests, Paa Joe's fantasy coffins of

Ghana; Meret Oppenheim's Object (1936); Jean Paul Gaultier's iconic cone corset worn by Madonna (1990); and Allan Wexler's *Coffee Seeks its Own Level* (1990).

To further support this trans-disciplinary conceptual framework, the students were given independent work tasks that involved generating sketches of vessels and written reflections on assigned readings. Studio practice was delivered in three-week studio interspersed with progress critiques and open work days. Cross-disciplinary studio practice provided direct engagement with the unique characteristics of different materials, methods, and processes. In the context of design, and to understand the broad impact it makes on the world, practitioners and students must engage with the process of design (Olsen & Heaton 2010, p.81), as well as the understanding that comes through making. Across the Workshops, the vessel theme underpinned studio practice with perpetual conceptual value.

The Wood Module: A Simple Spoon

Initially using a pre-machined computer numeric control (CNC) timber blank, students were given a single session to produce a completed spoon. This exercise introduced function and ergonomics, timber properties, hand-tool techniques, tactility, textures and symbolism. Students designed their spoon based anticipated useage, and then were required to prepare a meal using that spoon, analyse the experience, and post the outcome via social media. Critique of an object via kinaesthetic learning provided meaningful knowledge exchange amongst the cohort, and revealed how design is an iterative and socially constructed process. Following on lessons learned from their first spoon, students went on to design and shape a second, more refined and personalised, spoon.

On the surface, a "vessel" such as a spoon is an inherently functional device that is fairly easily constructed. From a deeper conceptual or historical level a spoon also taps into a universal

cultural point transcendent of time, place and discipline—spoons can be linked to nearly all cultures across all time (Wiezbicka 2015). Perhaps because they are linked to mundane domestic routines and rituals, or symbolic of cultural customs ceremony and identity, spoons unwittingly play an important role in our lives, and offer a great opportunity for creative expression. Thus, a simple spoon carving project was able to promote an awareness and critique of how design is a powerful tool linked to every aspect of life.

The Clay Module: A Deconstructed Cube

In the Clay module, the project challenged presumed aims of a ceramic vessel; goals of utility and preconceived notions of archetypal vases were abandoned in favour of an exploration of plane and volume driven by formal analysis. The brief commenced with the construction, then deconstruction, of a cube built with slabs of clay. Traditional notions of how a ceramic vessel form should be conceived, look and operate were set aside. The manipulation of a hollow cube acted as an exploration of binary relationships: interior and exterior, top and the bottom, front and back, surface and form, image and object, function and dysfunction, hand and eye, nature and culture. Unhinging these dichotomies allowed students to re-envisioned form and resulted in unique and unexpected vessels where 'containment' became as much about defining a volume of space as it was about physically holding anything.

By hand-modelling an amorphous material into an immutable, fired form, the student played the role of a transformer. This offered a valuable experience of material engagement and tangible results for students in an increasingly technologically mediated world.

The Textiles Module: A Personalised T-Shirt

The project brief in Textiles focussed on the ubiquitous t-shirt as both a container for the body, and as a vessel carrying meanings and identities. T-shirts have been employed to convey

messages, whether overt or obscure. Typically, as highlighted by Crane, "the T-shirt speaks to issues related to ideology, difference, and myth: politics, race, gender, and leisure. The variety of slogans and logos that appear on T-shirts is enormous." (Crane 2000) In this instance, the T-shirt provides a convenient and culturally iconic canvas on which students could simultaneously cover and reveal themselves. Beginning with their own names and favourite things, students were guided in a range of design exercises, gathering and manipulating text and images to develop a graphic logotype of their 'personal brand'. Students were able to experiment with screen printing on cloth as a means of exploring personal expression, labelling, identity, and public versus private notions of self, ultimately transforming an ordinary T-shirt into a sort of self-portrait.

The T-shirt allowed for a distinctly intimate approach to notions of vessel. Just one layer removed from the surface of the skin, it taps the very root of the container metaphor that extends from the understanding of selves as containers, wherein skin is the boundary surface defining inside and outside territories (Lakoff & Johnsen 2003).

Results and Conclusions

Prior to the SOA&D's commitment to inter- and cross-disciplinary courses, broad exposure to studio materials and methods would be accumulated through separate semester-long courses. By compressing exposure to three disciplines into one semester, *Hold Everything* presented an option different to our usual structures; it broke the mould that assumed an end-goal of mastery wherein the 1000-level course is the first step of a long journey. *Hold Everything* reconsidered the SOA&D's target audiences and their values and goals regarding 'making'.

In the final assessment, we verbally asked the students, "What was your biggest take-away, or the most important thing you learned, from this course". The responses clustered into two main

categories: Appreciation of the physical skills of studio practice, including attitudes effecting work; and awareness of broader conceptual applications of a seemingly ordinary and ubiquitous object, the vessel.

My biggest take-away was:

"The ability to make stuff."
"How different things are made, and how much patience and time it takes to make them!"
"Patience. Application [of effort]."
"Different skills. Patience. Slow down."
"Challenging myself to use difficult materials and getting into making."
"The physical activities; it is possible to do art!"
"Always balancing function and design."
"Learning to keep a visual diary to develop ideas."
"I liked getting to test my skills across a range of media; it took me out of my comfort zone and I got exposed to new artists."
"The definition of vessel."
"The scope of what a vessel is."
"The concept of the container; thinking outside the box."
"The broad ideas around vessel, opening up that thinking."
"Think[ing] more broadly about a basic concept. Broaden[ing] the scope of a basic understanding."
"I changed my perspective on what a vessel is/would be, and [my] thinking about disposable cups, bags, etc."
"An expanded view about vessels; I liked how vessel linked all media."
"That 'container' holds intangible ideas."
"Not to have preconceived ideas about what something should be."

(*Hold Everything* students 2017, personal communications, 2 June)

One student went on to explain how, as she reached into her pocket, she had the realisation that *it* was a vessel; and then, the wallet she reached for inside the pocket was yet *another* vessel; and following on that thinking she considered that her coat was a vessel holding her body, and, actually, she herself was a vessel too! She concluded that this domino chain of heightened consciousness around 'what holds what' could go on infinitely, like a magical set of Russian dolls.

While it is too soon to fully evaluate the impact of this course, this anecdote sheds light on the kind of mind-blowing epiphany that is possible when a course embraces a trans-disciplinary conceptual framework that fosters conceptual thinking beyond the scope of a single discipline that can be applied to a wider world of making objects and beyond. Their comments indicate they appreciate the layers of meaning and conceptual interconnections that give intellectual substance to the mediums. Their engagement with craft production and expanded notions of the vessel will retain value long after the wood shavings have been swept up, the screens have been washed out, and the kilns have cooled down.

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