Michelle Coakes

FDRC Grant to attend the National Conference on Education of the Ceramic Arts

I have always defined myself as a potter. What I am is what I do. It colors how I see the world and what I value. For the last three decades (plus) that definition has been amended to “Potter, who also teaches.” Very soon now, I will return to simply, potter. I have loved being a teacher (mostly.) But, I look forward to selfish time in my own studio – working at my own pace and by my own schedule.

In March, I attended the National Conference on Education of the Ceramic Arts with the assistance of a Faculty Development grant. This year, two LLCC ceramics students accompanied me. I have attended this conference about every other year since the 1980’s. More than 6000 potters, professors and students from all over the world attend the conference each year. It is a four-day conference that includes hundreds of presenters, who lecture, discuss and demonstrate a variety of topics relevant to the ceramics field. At any given time, there are up to eight things going on at once.

I have taken dozens of LLCC students to this conference over the last 16 years. They seek out what is of interest to them. For example, this year, one student was interested in developing her techniques, and pursued opportunities to watch potters and sculptors at work. The other student is interested in using ceramics to serve her community, and so attended lectures and discussions about ways to use ceramics to build communities. They both came back to Springfield energized and inspired – exactly what a student trip should do, regardless of subject/field of study.

My focus at the conference was slightly different this year. Of course, I wanted to make sure the students were getting what they needed from the experience. But I was less focused on the discussions that addressed issues around teaching. As I am about to move out of the classroom and into the studio, I focused on topics related to life in the studio. For example, I need to learn more about marketing on the “inter-webs.” I need to learn more about firing my new wood kiln. I may need strategies to stay inspired – to push myself beyond my comfort zone in the studio.

Next year, the NCECA conference will be held in Minneapolis. I have already promised those two LLCC students that I will take them. (I can’t REALLY stop being a teacher!) I’ve started to save my pennies – and so are they.

I am very grateful for all the support I have gotten over the years – from the FDRC, from the administration, from my dean(s)…. That support has allowed me to build and maintain a professional network of friends and colleagues in my field. It has allowed me to learn new theories and techniques – in ceramics and in the teaching of ceramics. And, it has allowed me to share this amazing field - its history; its potential - with so many LLCC students.

Thank you for that.