

# RECAST REPORT 2025

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A creative  
report on impact  
using the Clay Cycle  
Methodology British  
Ceramics Biennial

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## Foreword, Joanne Mills, British Ceramics Biennial

In 2024, British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) invited Dr Dena Bagi to evaluate their Recast project. As an integral part of their reflective practice, the Recast team had discussed the conversations that were prompted, and the behaviours that were displayed, by participants over the course of the project. However, we felt that we wanted to avoid falling into the trap of looking for predetermined outcomes. We wanted to explore a process that would encourage us to zoom out and take a more expansive view. Dena had recently completed her PhD exploring how a specific methodology (Clay Cycle) might be used to reflect upon and respond to the experiences of participants in a creative clay project within the context of drug and alcohol addiction recovery. Dena also has a long history with Recast, having worked with BCB when the project first started. It therefore seemed like a good time to bring in Dena and the 'Clay Cycle' methodology. The report that Dena has compiled gives the details of the specific themes that were discussed and demonstrated by participants in Recast. Whilst it may seem distanced from the participants (there are no direct quotes) the process that led to the gathering of this data centered on direct listening and paying attention to what happened within each session. Rather than asking questions of the participants, they were given the space to make, talk and share. The artist in the room simply noted the themes as they arose. This evaluative process allowed those involved in leading the sessions to observe both expected and unexpected reactions to the creative activities. The resulting maps and memos offer support for some widely acknowledged creative health benefits (building resilience, cooperation) but also gives space to more nuanced reflections on what happens when clay, addiction recovery and the location of Stoke-on-Trent are brought together.

## Recast Report, 2025

The Recast project combines creativity, addiction recovery, and clay (British Ceramics Biennial, 2021). This long-standing clay project is embedded into an existing recovery offer in Stoke-on-Trent, enabling tens of individuals in recovery to engage with clay on a weekly basis - and links to be identified between the creative endeavour and their road to recovery. Artists Catherine Ralph, Sarah Fraser, Zeba Imam and Matthew Whiting, led by community curator Joanne Mills, aimed to provide individuals on drug and alcohol addiction recovery journeys with considered clay activities that would enable them to explore their creativity and get to know each other/themselves in a new way (British Ceramics Biennial, 2021). The Recast project is delivered in 8-week 'cycles' throughout the year, each cycle culminating in a 'residency' (four full days at the BCB Studio.) This report focused on one iteration, which took place in early 2025. BCB's aim for the workshops is for clay to become useful in an individual's recovery - to provide an alternative and impactful 'tool' that can facilitate personal growth within the journey for those manipulating it.

Each week, the four BCB Associate Artists worked with individuals currently engaging in recovery services in Stoke-on-Trent. These workshops started with introductions and social time, before moving into a material-exploration and then a skills-based activity, where participants could learn about clay's material properties and unique creative potential. Later in the 8-week programme, this skills-based section of the session became more self-led, as individuals were encouraged to instigate and work on their own creative projects. Sessions ended with each participant working on a reflective tablet (or palimpsest) that enabled layers of experience/reflection to be applied by sgraffito (a technique where a pattern is created by scratching through a surface coating to reveal an underlying contrasting colour). Objects made were placed within maps/grids at the end of sessions, which were a key tool in the methodology being used by myself to measure the project's impact.





Figure 3; Bagi, Dena, Interim Relational Map, being utilised after an clay workshop at the mid-point of Recast, 2025

After this process of mapping was complete, I completed a final Relational Map (in Figure 1), in collaboration with graphic designer Aigerim Zhumabayeva, which detailed the evaluative data from the project. Using this Relational Map as a guide, I produced a series of short descriptive memos, which detail the key ways in which participants' engagement with clay had a positive impact on their personal growth within a recovery context - an aim identified by the British Ceramics Biennial before the project. A memo, in the context of the Grounded Theory methodology, is a piece of writing that aids the documentation of thoughts and interpretations of the data at hand (Smith, 2024, p.157). They are designed to serve as a bridge between raw data and theoretical concepts, and create the opportunity to refine ideas, track patterns, and develop theories (Smith, 2024, p.157). The **bold** words relate directly to the headers of the relational 'clusters' present in the map.



# Resilience

Manipulating 'volatile' clay encouraged participants to develop and practise their skills in **resilience**. The volatility of the material was exposed at multiple points during the Recast project when participants were forming and creating objects. The participants were asked to manipulate clay in each of its transformation states (liquid, plastic, dry) throughout the project. Each stage carries **risks** and challenges, linked to the volatility of keeping the material 'safe' or 'successful'.

Participants repeatedly communicated a sense of **acceptance** whilst attempting to 'tame' the volatile material. Their **readiness** for their creative intentions to **fail** whilst using clay was apparent, as they discussed feeling at ease with its unpredictability. Direct comparisons were made to the inevitability and unpredictability of certain aspects of their recovery journey and the importance of **letting go** and sitting with the uncertainties of clay.

Participants reflected on how the determination to 'just carry on' is needed when making with the material. They connected this observation to their recovery journeys at multiple points throughout the project.

The volatility of the material caused participants to feel confusion, disorientation, and fear. These feelings were linked to a questioning of their own ability to creatively manipulate clay in a manner deemed successful or not.

Firing clay leads to a state of **permanence**. They connected this to an individual's unbreakable and ever-lasting resilience. Through focusing on the 'foreverness' of clay as an object, participants discussed how the material could be used to make lucky charms as tokens of participants' strengths and resilient nature. This was discussed whilst participants created small, carryable objects during a workshop.

Imperfections within their creative outcomes were met with indifference and **acceptance** by the participants, reflecting that clay had '**no right way**' of being manipulated.

# Co-operation

**Co-operative** making and camaraderie between participants was observed whilst everyone was working with the clay. This predominantly occurred when participants were discussing their sense of place (the emotional connections people develop with location, encompassing the meaning and value they attribute to it). At multiple points, references were made to Stoke-on-Trent being the home of the pottery industry. The city's history connected the group, suggesting a shared sense of **place**.

Participants discussed the dual identity of Stoke-on-Trent as one that merged its heritage as a 'tired' industrial city and its communities that made it a warm and welcoming place to live. During the workshops, participants spent extended periods reminiscing and sharing stories of the city, including of its ceramics-based industrial past. For example, childhood **memories** in and around the industry were often shared in the group. These conversations were light and full of **laughter**. They showed how participants were developing connections linked to their shared sense of **belonging**.

Clay offers both 'decay and decadence'. Participants contrasted the material's muddy raw state against its ability to create polished or high-end objects for our homes. They used these contrasting states as a metaphor to communicate the duality of their relationship with a post-industrial city that holds both traumatic memories yet hope for the future.

Belief that Stoke-on-Trent's residents should have an innate connection to the material was shared among the group's participants. Many participants believed they '**should have it in them**' to work clay successfully. They also reflected on clay's unique creative properties. Many participants felt their outcomes were successful or **precious**.

Peer-based camaraderie and support was shown through communal making. Positive affirmations of successful making were regularly shared between participants, alongside general positivity and the '**lifting up**' of others'. Important personal relationships with others outside the making group were represented, with objects being made **especially for** those people who participants held dear. For example, figures were made for others' mantelpieces, or signs were made bearing loved ones' names.

The participants also developed strong connections between **luck** in recovery and the fired object. They explained how clay acted as an ongoing, non-human peer during their recovery.



Figure 4; Harper, Jenny, British Ceramics Biennial, Recast participant making with clay, 2025

## Escape

Making with clay provided an **escape** from deep thought. Simple, **repetitive** tasks provided an opportunity to be '**taken away**' from emotive thoughts connected to recovery.

Multiple participants appreciated how the routine of attending clay sessions offered them regular opportunities for time out from deep thought. The social setting of the clay studio and the simple repetitive tasks gave participants a distraction from their deep recovery-based 'work'.

The sessions also provided them with a calm and relaxing environment. The **calming** activity was a space for skills to be developed. Participants found this **valuable**. The opportunity to build skills whilst relaxing seemed to hold particular significance for participants who had worked or currently work in a skilled trade.

## Being human

The **wildness** of clay was compared to the messiness of human nature (or the 'primordial self'). Clay's wild nature, the difficulty in 'taming' it, and challenges of realising creative goals with it, were compared to the shared sense that the workshop's participants were '**wild**' and hard to control.

The **limitless** possibilities of clay were shared in the group, specifically in relation to its cyclical transformative form (liquid, plastic, dry). Clay's limitless ability to be re-born, or reworked, reflected the participants' non-linear strategies to **grow or change** in recovery (due to their 'wildness').

**Participants felt freedom** when being creative with clay. The material's limitless creative potential was communicated as an asset in it being able to speak to a participant's own growth in recovery.

# Space to heal

The body-brain or the cognitive **space between** the brain and the body was accessed regularly during Recast. Participants occupied this **space** whilst making with clay and communicated the opportunity this gave for healing-associated thought. In particular, it was emphasised that clay afforded individuals time for a slower pace of thought. In providing time, clay helped participants to feel settled in the process of making whilst in the studio environment. This was also described as feeling calm or even nothing at all.

The **repercussions** of manhandling clay were discussed in these slow and quiet moments of making with clay. Clay remembers its original shape, even when it is reworked. Its physical memory was likened to the repercussions of behaviours the participants had demonstrated in addiction.

The parallels between recovery and clay as a creative material were explored at multiple points during Recast. Participants shared deep reflections with ease during the workshops. For example, the realisation that decision-making was a new, sometimes tense, pastime in recovery - and that active addiction took decision making out of individual's everyday existence.

Whilst making with clay, participants explored the acceptance of imperfections in both clay and in oneself. The decision to **keep the cracks** in clay (rather than spend time smoothing them out) was a deliberate choice to reflect these imperfections. Seeing the **value** in the imperfections of the clay and its traumatic memory was reflected upon when seeing finished objects and sharing them with others.

The slow and steady pace that making settles thoughts to was, of course, commented on heavily during the workshops. However, deeper reflections upon clays **cathartic** 'power' laid in the parallels between essential changes needed for recovery, and the transformative and volatile nature of clay as an artistic material. For example, the repercussions and memory of clay, was directly compared to the memory and trauma of loved ones linked to actions taken in active addiction by participants present.

# Self care

Participants explored personal assets whilst manipulating clay. They focused on taking the time in the studio-setting to reflect on how they can be **kind** to themselves. There was a connection between **caring** for clay and caring for oneself.

As the **cracks** in the clay were smoothed out, participants reflected on their ability to heal prominent relationships in their lives that may have been marked in the past. The term '**kind hands**' was coined early in the workshop programme to encapsulate clay's responsiveness to repetitive gentle (and kind) actions when forming it – much like how the nervous system responds well to kindness.



Figure 5; Harper, Jenny, British Ceramics Biennial, Recast participant making with clay, 2025

**Pride** in one's creative achievement when using clay was commonplace during Recast, even when ceramic objects did not come out as intended. This **pride** was linked to the object and the individual's ability to achieve something that was challenging and new. Terms like '**you soon pick it up**' was used to communicate participants' abilities to persevere and develop skills needed to successfully mould clay.

**Participants' confidence** increased throughout the Recast project. They repeatedly developed skills and patience with the material to realise their creative intentions. They were excited to see their clay objects after they had been through the drying and firing processes.

Participants communicated **personal stories** in the ceramic objects they were producing, often through the inscription of **sentimental** messages or the creation of small keepsakes. Such objects were produced in the hope that they may provide individuals with positive and inspiring 'messages' during future times of need.



# CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The following themes, which are represented on the final Relational Map ( see figure 1 ), characterise the personal growth within recovery for those on a recovery journey, which occurred when interactions with clay took place during Recast 2025. Links have been made with the themes and connected research in the broad areas of addiction recovery, creative approaches to recovery, and trauma recovery, to give a picture of the impact taken place.

Manipulating 'volatile' clay encouraged participants to develop and practise their skills in resilience. The transformative nature of the material provided opportunities for such skills development. Specifically, an acceptance of failure and experiencing feelings of fear, confusion, and a sense of tension were identified as being useful skills to 'practise' in resilience for those on an addiction recovery journey. Resilience is a fundamental skill needed for the holistic transformation that takes place as part of addiction recovery (White, 2018). Mastery of resilience allows individuals to form a version of themselves away from addiction that encompasses physical, emotional, and civic transformation (White, 2018).

Co-operative making and camaraderie were demonstrated as the clay was being manipulated. Camaraderie was found in a shared sense of place, highlighted during the identification of clay as a symbol for the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Participants found common ground in the duality of the city that was 'tired' and industrial but also a warm and welcoming place to live. Childhood memories of clay also connected participants and highlighted a shared sense of belonging.

Participants showed peer-based support for each other through uplifting acts of camaraderie whilst making clay objects (often for loved ones outside of the group). The potential craft-based making has for skills in co-operation had been widely explored, particularly its potential to help individuals to tolerate ambiguity, enter into valuable dialogic exchange, and practise empathic address (Raney, 2013). In a recovery context, making and creating supports those who have experienced social isolation due to an active addiction, giving them the opportunity to engage in caring interaction within the creative space (Sloan, 2023).

Making with clay provided participants with an escape from deep thought. Simple repetitive tasks offered an opportunity for participants to be 'taken away' from emotive

thoughts connected to recovery. Routine, repetition, and the social setting of the studio contributed to feelings of escape, predominantly from the deep and difficult recovery based 'work' being undertaken elsewhere. As well as being seen as a calming distraction, participants identified working with clay as valuable due to the skills-based nature of being able to manipulate the material.

The development of a routine and use of repetitive activities are practised in peer-based recovery settings and programmes throughout the UK (Best, 2014). These are largely aimed at enabling an individual to work towards a safe and secure home environment (Best, 2014, pg.35), but they can also be used to facilitate a transcendence into a meditative state. This state can help an individual to navigate and find paths within the kaleidoscopic and non-linear 'road' to recovery (Manley et al., 2014). The opportunities to rebirth clay were also compared to non-linear strategies used to grow within recovery by participants during Recast.

The wildness of clay was directly compared to the messiness of human nature (the 'primordial self'). The wild nature of the participants and the difficulties they had in 'taming' themselves was observed. The transcendence taking place here into a visceral or 'primordially aware' state gives individuals the experiential knowledge needed to fully engage with their bodies or their 'human-ness'. This is thought to be deeply healing, when the individuals have experienced trauma (Van der Kolk, 2015).

The body-brain or the cognitive space between the brain and the body was accessed regularly during Recast. Participants occupied this space when making with clay. They reflected on the opportunity sitting in it this space gave them for healing-associated thought and catharsis. Feelings of being settled when making with clay and the slow approach needed for its success were key to this constructive state of being, as well as experiencing clay's reciprocity. Occupying this space can enable an individual to metaphorically represent one's inner world, which is immanent to the therapeutic process (Crocker, 2018, pg. 146). The multifaceted ways in which clay and creativity involving a bodily-awareness are widely understood as being cathartic (see, for example, Sloan, 2024).

Participants successfully explored personal assets whilst manipulating clay. They focused on taking the time in the studio-setting to reflect on how they can be kind

to themselves. There was a connection between caring for clay and caring for oneself. Clay responds to kind hands – much as the human nervous system responds to kindness.

Pride, confidence, and excitement surrounding the creative process of manipulating clay and in the ceramic outcomes when fired demonstrated a belief in oneself. Personal messages in this confident and safe space were 'stored' in clay, acting as reminders for harder times. The ability to 'store' messages in clay was one of many examples of how clay acted as an effective tool for complex self-expression – an act that can develop a sense of self beyond an 'addict' identity (Sloan, 2024).

## Notes on the methodology

The Clay Cycle Methodology was created by myself during my doctoral studies. I systematically constructed the methodology by making adaptations to Grounded Theory (Charmaz et al. 2019), rooted in clay's primordial potential. The result was a cyclical analysis and testing process, akin to a repeated, or cyclical, Grounded Theory system. The new methodological system 're-samples' data in a cyclical manner, mimicking that of clay's geological (and never ending) epistemic cycle.

The diagram below demonstrates how information is extrapolated at multiple points, resulting in a generative 'spiral' of curation/pedagogic design. This method is in contrast to the 'standard' use of Grounded Theory, which allows data to emerge within a single mapping process (Charmaz et al. 2019).

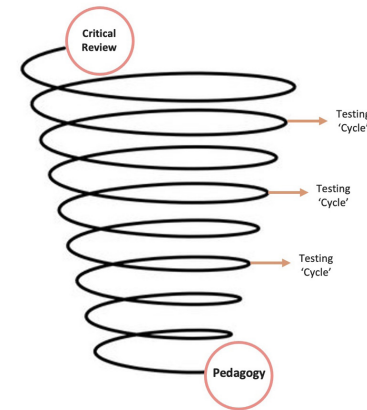


Figure 6; Bagi, Dena, 2025, Clay Cycle - a diagram

The literature review undertaken in the initial stages of the construct the Clay Cycle methodology extrapolated that clay connects its manipulator to their visceral/primordial sense of being. Clay enables oppressed/stigmatised individuals to be able to form a new sense of self, during the social transformation that takes place during an addiction recovery journey. Traumatic relationships can be remoulded with earth, or clay, whilst the manipulator is experiencing the primordial connectivity and reflexive dialogue - by engaging with the material's earthly origins - providing decolonial or recreative opportunities to form new senses of self, 'free' from oppression.

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