



Career story: Networking and microcommunities

This career story comes from an Australian artist. The account is a great resource for understanding unique career journeys artists can find themselves on. When reading the career story, reflect on what you have learned in your degree and how this might equip you to network and create or join micro communities in your career interest field.

At the back of the resource, you will find more information and sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

Graham's story

"I was going to be an artist, I was going to make it happen. The attitude was, qualification or not, that's what I'm going to do".

A locally, nationally and internationally renowned ceramic artist, Graham Hay's incredible career has spanned over two decades. His work has featured in over 130 exhibitions worldwide. Graham's research and expertise has led to invitations to teach and demonstrate on over 220 occasions and in more than twelve countries. As a celebrated Western Australian paper clay expert, Graham has come a long way from his humble beginnings, growing up on a farm with four brothers and a sister in small-town New Zealand.

Graham is an avid supporter of, and contributor to the Perth art scene. He is also a member of multiple groups including the [Chamber of Arts and Culture WA \(CACWA\)](#), the [Ceramic Art Association of WA \(CAAWA\)](#), [Artsource](#) and a number of national ceramic art associations. His various residences range from the local Tranby College to the National College of Arts in Lahore, Punjab. His longest has been the 16 years spent at the Robertson Park Art Studio in West Perth, which he also co-founded.

Alongside exhibitions with fellow art residents, Graham still utilises the Robertson Park Arts Studio space for weekly pottery and sculpture workshops, which he began in 1998.



Image 1. Artist Graham Hay with "Bureaucraft I" 2002.
Photo: Frances Dennis.

Graham is also a prolific writer and one of the leading experts on paper clay techniques, having participated in and led various paper clay conferences and symposia in Hungary, Denmark, Sweden and the US. In Graham's words, the creation of these "micro-communities" around art goes a long way to developing an "organic, socially dynamic and stimulating creative environment."

Graham pursued art during school as it was the only subject that provided the same level of play and experimentation he had experienced during his farming childhood. Art developed into a greater passion in high school, but he was discouraged from pursuing art as an occupation on the basis that work opportunities in his small, rural community were limited. Despite this, Graham went on to study art at the local Teachers' College and made full use of after-hours access to a ceramic studio across the road from his house. His pursuit continued when he relocated to Western Australia, attending TAFE community ceramic classes at high schools such as Perth Modern and Applecross Senior High School.

Graham's specialisation in paper clay and ceramics developed over an extended period of time. He reflects that working with paper clay seemed like a "natural progression" and a rational rebellion against paper and writing. This was after 12 years of schooling, several years as a researcher and economist, seven years at Otago University, the University of Western Australia, Edith Cowan University and Curtin University combined with the demands of documenting his own work.

Paper clay is simply clay mixed with paper fibres, which provides increased versatility and potential to experiment. It can be fired and stored like clay, but takes less time to dry and results in a stronger material. And unlike other materials, it can be reshaped and fixed before the drying process. The paper fibres act as a glue that allows them to be merged with wet, dry and plastic clay, with stable joins.

Treating your studies as the first years of your career

It was not until 1990, when Graham met full-time clay artists while travelling through the US and Europe that he made up his mind to become a ceramic artist. He told himself, "I was going to be an artist, I was going to make it happen. The attitude was, qualification or not, that's what I'm going to do". From that time on, Graham actively engaged in his education and training and made full use of professional opportunities on the journey to forge his art career.

Graham entered formal tertiary art education at a different stage of his life than younger high school graduates and he recalls that it made a big difference. He had a clear goal in mind when he decided to attend university: he was aiming not for a degree but for a career. As a third-time tertiary student, he found that his personal goals led him to be a lot more focused on his studies.

Reflecting on his life as a graduate, Graham notes: "as people say, it takes 10 years in order to survive financially with your chosen occupation after graduation". Being a "poor, mature-age student," however, he knew that he would not have the luxury of a long establishment period. Instead, Graham treated the three and a half years of his degree as the first years of his artistic career. Looking back, he jokes, "that left only 6 years of potential struggle afterwards!"



Image 2. Graham Hay, 4 tonne compressed sculpture in the High Court of Australia, 1998.

Goal-oriented study

Graham had a specific goal in mind when he attended university, and he negotiated an exemption from minor studies and compulsory wheel throwing. He didn't think there was a future in wheel throwing, especially when every other student was perhaps doing the same thing. To make these changes to his study program, he had to attend an interview process, involving a portfolio of his work. But his efforts paid off, as the time saved from wheel throwing was put to good use experimenting with paper clay in the art studio.

He describes his modified program in terms of the autonomy it permitted him:

“In a way, I undertook an informal Master of Art degree by research within their undergraduate program. Within a short time, I had developed a number of unique techniques and my work was beginning to look more and more unusual.”

In an odd role reversal, Graham's peers and teachers began to inquire about his experiments. Eventually frustrated with the time this took, he suggested a workshop where he could address everyone collectively. A fellow student organised the weekend workshop, which was attended by most of his peers and some teaching staff. This was a turning point in Graham's career because:

“Word of mouth then led to requests for workshops with ceramic groups and articles, which went from being in W.A only to interstate and then international.”

Taking the initiative to build networks

Later, when other art students notified him of international paper clay articles and journals, Graham grabbed the opportunity to connect. He immediately contacted world-leading ceramic artists and writers [Brian Gartside](#) and [Rosette Gault](#) with details of his experiments and research, and he was soon invited to collaborate with them. Graham's student work was featured in Rosette Gault's 1998 book [Paper clay](#), as the cover image for fellow artist Anne Lightwood's 2000 book [Working with Paperclay and Other Additives](#). This eventually led to an invitation to co-host the first international paper clay [symposium](#) in Hungary alongside Rosette Gault.

Without taking the initiative, Graham would never have known about the wider paper clay community and would not have been able to connect with experienced artists working with similar ideas and techniques.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett.