

Margaret Macintyre Latta
University of Calgary

In Search of Aesthetic Learning Spaces

Introduction

As a teacher and parent I feel educational reforms of the last two decades have focused on objectifying specific learning outcomes resulting in much superficial rather than substantial learning. With emphasis on what may be superficial behaviors, little attention is given to assimilation, internalization, or integration of thoughts. Reading Britzman (1991) and Garrison (1995) validates the direction of my thoughts. Britzman's (1991) discussion of the structure of teaching experience that compartmentalizes knowledge, separating pedagogy from content, knowledge from interests, theory from practice, and Garrison's (1995) view of the necessity of style in teaching both point for me to the pivotal place that the *aesthetic* should hold in teaching-learning situations. Dewey (1934) states that aesthetic experience is "experience in its integrity ... experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience" (p. 274). This is precisely the dilemma Britzman (1991) portrays of the fragmentation of experience and how that plays out in praxis. Garrison's (1995) concern with the dominant technocratic discourse and its devastation of style reiterates this. I conclude that greater aesthetic awareness is a pragmatic and philosophical necessity missing in much schooling. But, as Garrison and Britzman suggest, the existing educational structures do not support or encourage this. An aesthetic context calls for a rethinking and revaluing of what is educationally important. Perhaps, as Greene (1991) states, "it will also disclose the unexpected. Education will be viewed as if, after all, it can be otherwise" (p. xi). I am exploring such possibilities along with the concrete implications of taking aesthetic considerations seriously in a school setting. Opened in September 1997, the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, the Calgary Board of Education, has chosen to value the creating process, primary to the arts, in the school curriculum as a whole. The people involved obviously see a significance in the *aesthetic* for all learning. Thus it seems an ideal situation in which to pursue connections between curriculum theory-practice and the aesthetic.

Purpose

The Creative Art Centre's mandate is to infuse the arts into the school curriculum as a whole. They define the aesthetic as a valuing of the arts making processes as an approach to meaning making. Thus aesthetic experience is not a function of a physical object, but of the awareness that the act of creation precipitates. The purpose of my inquiry is to explore how teachers at the Creative Arts Centre create, maintain, and nurture such aesthetic learning spaces in their classrooms.

Margaret Macintyre Latta is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate Division of Educational Research under the supervision of Dr. J. Field. She can be reached by e-mail at blatta@rockyview.ab.ca.

Over the 1997-1998 academic year I explored with participating volunteers (26 students, 26 parents, and 3 teachers) how the aesthetic constituted learning experiences in particular ways. I am continuing to do this over the 1998-1999 academic year. Dialogue is the fundamental process in which meaning and understanding are evolving through individual open-ended interviews and focus groups. This is supported by artifacts indicating learning processes and development and regular classroom observations, as a means to enhance and validate insights gained through dialogue.

I am aware that themes and observations are emerging part-way through this inquiry that begin to document the aesthetic milieu being formed and reformed, initiating consideration of the significance.

Themes Emerging

Teachers and students are thinking and acting differently in regard to how learning occurs in classrooms. This is evidenced in a style of aesthetic play that permeates the observed classrooms. This is a sensitivity to the many nuances and possibilities present and a willingness to play along with them. Initiating, sustaining, and enhancing links between students and learning through aesthetic play is central in these classrooms. Gadamer's (1989) view of aesthetic play as a pattern or structure continually reconstituted by those who play along with it parallels my experiences of patterning in these classrooms. These are spaces infused and unified by pattern. These patterns appear, disappear, and reappear. I continually rediscover patterns in each classroom. In each pattern different interactive relationships are explored. But all arise from perceptions of the relation between parts and whole. These patterns are signs of dynamic activity at work. Dewey (1934) talks of common patterns in his notion of *experience*, commenting that there are conditions to be met without which aesthetic experience cannot come to be. Through being attentive to these various relations of parts to whole in these patterns, I am aware of recursive themes infused in fluctuating patterns. It is the confluence of these themes as interactive relationships that forms and reforms the patterns; always in the making. Perhaps they form the needed space (Dewey's conditions) for aesthetic play.

Attentiveness. Through close observation and given time to dwell with and in learning situations, attentiveness is a willingness on the part of teachers and students to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations.

The personal. All learning intersects with personal experience. Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience. There are many ways the world can be known.

Emotional. Learning is about discovery. The discovery is neither an object nor a concept, but rather a feeling or mental state that is personally invested with commitment.

Felt freedom. Learning needs space and freedom that encourages diversity.

Discursive. Felt freedom constructs a pattern of thought. Dialogue with self and others is crucial. The discourse entered into becomes the link to sense-making. It suggests an organization for the learning process to take.

Inquiry-guided. The organization emerges from the inquiry itself. It is always in the making. As such it requires openness to possibilities, attentive listening, and responding.

Projective. Encouraging projection means students do not plan all aspects of their learning endeavor to begin with. This promotes speculation and conjecture about possibilities.

Self-identity. Relations between self and other are continually addressed through learning activities that foster greater self-consciousness.

Observations Emerging

- All students, parents, teachers, and administration reported coming to the Creative Arts Centre searching for differences in learning.
- In attracting students and parents desiring difference, classrooms have a diverse student population.
- The centrality and importance of the teacher's place and role in affecting aesthetic considerations in the classroom is crucial.
- Classrooms need to be organized for a meeting space, large project work space, individual desk work, and greater display space.
- Resources, books, supplies, equipment, and computer work stations must be more accessible for classroom use on an as-needed basis.
- Time to connect, share ideas, be informed as to directions teachers and students are taking, and provide support in teams, is needed.
- Ongoing education of parents and the wider community is beneficial.
- Time blocks that are of a sufficient length to allow for extensive projects is a consideration; flexible time blocks to accommodate special events.
- Teachers and administration must have a common understanding of teaching in an arts-infused environment for continuity and development long term; ongoing professional development is valuable, with the emphasis being on teachers discovering more possibilities themselves for their teaching practices in an arts-infused environment.
- All staff (teachers, administration, and support) must know what is happening in classrooms in order to encourage and support creative teaching.

Summary

The Creative Arts Centre seems to be filling a need in the public education system in Calgary. Aesthetic play is the dominant teaching style. This is a continual process of connecting parts within the whole. Increasingly student thinking and work evidence greater attention to assimilation, internalization, and integration of thoughts. Knowledge is less compartmentalized, with theory and practice, and knowledge and interests, closely intertwined. This is teacher-dependent. Teachers must be confident in approaching learning in this way. A complementary physical space and scheduling structure is required to further foster and support creative teaching-learning. Aesthetic considerations in teaching-learning situations appear to honor individuality and difference through curricular diversity, multiple forms of representation, and ongoing assessment that is attentive to qualities and differences in understanding. These considerations are qualitative, personal, and value-laden and do not fit

well into existing educational and accountability frameworks. An aesthetic context appears to call for rethinking and revaluing what is educationally important. Thus a common vision of learning at the Creative Arts Centre must continually be addressed through ongoing professional development for teachers and other staff and educational opportunities for parents and the wider community.

I look forward to exploring these considerations further over the 1998-1999 academic year.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiasm and interest of the participating teachers, students, school administration, and parents of the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, the Calgary Board of Education. Their continued support and commitment to this endeavor is appreciated.

Note

This inquiry is not intended to be evaluative in any regard. The aim is to consider the significance of the aesthetic in such a school setting and how teachers create, maintain, and nurture aesthetic learning spaces in their classrooms.

References

- Britzman, D.P. (1991). *Practice makes practice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall Trans.). New York: Crossroads (Original work published 1960).
- Garrison, J.W. (1995). Style and the art of teaching. In J.W. Garrison & A.G. Rud, Jr. (Eds.), *The educational conversation: Closing the gap* (pp. 41-60). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Greene, M. (1991). Foreword. In D. Britzman (Ed.), *Practice makes practice* (pp. ix-xi). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.