

Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences

P. BRUCE UHRMACHER

University of Denver

Denver, Colorado, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reveal ways to provide the opportunity for students to have aesthetically engaged learning experiences. Using John Dewey's ideas from *Art as Experience* as a framework, the author uses aesthetic theory to show how such ends can be reached. In addition, he suggests six themes that teachers can draw upon to help students attain engaged learning experiences. The themes, which are elaborated upon fully in this article, include connections, active engagement, sensory experience, perceptivity, risk taking, and imagination. In addition to providing engaged learning, the upshot of providing aesthetic learning experiences is likely to include student satisfaction, an increase in perceptual knowledge, episodic memory retention, meaning making, and creativity and innovation.

INTRODUCTION

As the faculty leader/instructor of a teacher professional development institute—the Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado—each summer I have the opportunity to teach K–12 teachers from around the state of Colorado who seek instruction in using aesthetics (a vague concept to most participants when they start the program) to further their educational goals. While these teachers have an interest in learning from the arts (workshops in dance, theater, visual art, music, and poetry) to enhance their teaching, their ultimate educational goals vary. Some are interested in raising state test scores; some want to learn how the ideas will assist their teaching an academic discipline; some want to use the arts to rally community support for their schools. While the teachers' ultimate goals diverge, as one might expect (Eisner, 1994a; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), their penultimate goals are much more uniform. They want their students to be engaged learners.

A number of researchers have documented the lack of student engagement in classrooms. Denise Pope (2001) suggests that even the “best”

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students are “doing school”: “They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on ‘doing’—going through the correct motions—than on learning and engaging with the curriculum” (p. 4). This point has been echoed in various ways over the years (Goodlad, 1984; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Elliot Eisner (2005) suggests that inasmuch as educators want to provide occasions for excitement, satisfaction, and meaning, they ought to focus on “degrees of engagement students display in the classroom” rather than test scores. Jennifer Fredricks, Phyllis Blumenfeld, and Alison Paris (2004) in their review of the literature on engagement point out that despite various definitions (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) and measures, which in their view needs further examination and synthesis, “engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in schools” (p. 87).

What, then, can we do to get all students engaged in classrooms? The purpose of this article is to present a set of ideas derived from the arts to assist educators in providing all students with enriched or aesthetically engaging learning experiences regardless of the ultimate aims desired. Whether aiming toward ideals set out in a core knowledge school or a progressive school, teachers are in a position to help students turn their ordinary learning experiences into aesthetic ones. The upshot of this transformation is “deep” (Wong, 2007) or aesthetic engagement.

A PRAGMATIC LENS AND RELATED THEORIES

The ideas contained herein may be called pragmatic for several reasons. To begin with, the educational, the aesthetic, and the general philosophical traditions to which I reach for ideas stem from proclaimed pragmatists such as John Dewey (1934, 1938), Cornel West (1989), Richard Shusterman (1992), and Thomas Alexander (1987). In addition, although they may not refer to themselves as pragmatists, the following from whom I have gleaned much about aesthetic experiences do have pragmatic leanings inasmuch as each has an intellectual debt to John Dewey’s ideas: Eisner (1985), Jim Garrison (1997), Maxine Greene (1995), and Philip Jackson (1998).

I choose the pragmatic tradition (more often referred to as “progressive” in the field of education) because of its holistic and pluralistic outlook (Dewey, 1934); its emphasis on hope (Greene, 1995; West, 1989); its central categories of education, democracy, and art as tools for creating a better world (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995); its offering of an epistemological narrative that provides a view of knowledge that embraces the arts (Eisner, 1994b); its upholding of criticism as a viable means to understanding (Eisner, 1997); its concern with care and connections between and among people and curriculum (Garrison, 1997; Noddings, 2005); its critique of examining art as high and low (Dewey, 1934); and its view of art as some-

thing relational and process oriented (Dewey, 1934). My aim, in a pragmatic sense, is to use the tradition, current writers, and Dewey's ideas as I interpret them toward educational ends.

There are, of course, various ways to provide engaged learning experiences for students in classrooms. Constructivists as well as those who embrace authentic pedagogy, for example, both aim for engaged forms of learning. In her work on "critical exploration," for example, Eleanor Duckworth (2006) has provided educators with important tools for cognitively engaging students through the constructivist lens of having teachers set up engaging learning activities, understand children's understanding, and ask significant questions as a way to provoke learning. While it is a matter for future research to see in what ways aesthetic learning experiences may be utilized alongside constructivists' ideas (Duckworth and others [Phillips, 2000]), I think they are complementary. In fact, I would suggest that students in the classrooms of well-prepared constructivist teachers are aesthetically engaged in the same way scientists (Eisner & Powell, 2002; Girod, Rau, & Schepige, 2003) and others who are invested in and connected to the tasks at hand are engaged.

The above suggestion could also be said about Fred Newmann's authentic pedagogy and aesthetic learning experiences in that when one is authentically engaged one is undergoing an aesthetic experience. Bruce King, Fred Newmann, and Dana Carmichael (2009) argue that authentic pedagogy—tasks that connect to students' lives—can be provided by paying attention to three criteria: 1) construction of knowledge (organizing, interpreting, evaluating, or synthesizing prior knowledge to solve new problems), 2) through disciplined inquiry, 3) to produce discourse, products, and performances that have meaning beyond success in school.

Because there are two established modes of pedagogy, among others, that aim to provide engaged learning in classrooms, the question arises as to why one more approach is needed. In my view, it is not a matter of embracing one approach or another. Teachers confronted with practical decisions (Connelly, 2008) ought to borrow eclectically (Schwab, 1972)¹ from constructivism, authentic pedagogy, and aesthetic learning experiences when needed. Duckworth's critical exploration provides an excellent way to engage students in problem solving, but some teachers do not have the time or inclination to change their pedagogical approaches to implement these ideas—a charge leveled at constructivism generally. The ideas outlined in this article would modestly reform but not necessarily revolutionize the way many teachers teach, although they might (Cuban, 1993). Newmann's authentic pedagogy also offers teachers excellent ideas on how cognitively to engage students in classrooms, but I agree with Laurance Splitter (2009), who pointed out that the third criterion of finding relevance outside of the classroom is one form of connecting students to content, but there are other ways to make education meaningful. The ideas in this article point out such ways to make education meaningful. Finally,

constructivist and authentic pedagogy educators tend to focus on cognitive engagement, and while they may agree with Dewey's holistic approach to education, they often fail to emphasize it. The ideas presented here include, but are not limited to, cognitive engagement.

RELATED RESEARCH

There are a number of researchers who have employed Dewey's aesthetic ideas as a way to understand teaching and curriculum. A sampling of current research reveals that some writers discuss Dewey's aesthetic ideas in relation to teaching, whether that be related to preservice education (Augustine & Zoss, 2006), professional development (Meadows, 2006), or teaching and curriculum more broadly defined (Simpson, Jackson, & Aycok, 2005; Wang, 2001). And there have been a number of writers who have contrasted Dewey's artistic ideas for education with other major thinkers who have also applied art to education generally. A few include the contrasting of Dewey with Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Read (Smith, 2005), with Lev Vygotsky and Rudolph Steiner (Booyeun, 2004), and with curricularist David Hawkins (Featherstone & Featherstone, 2002).

Some have focused on Dewey's aesthetic ideas in relation to specific academic disciplines such as art education (Aguirre, 2004; Van Camp, 2004); language arts (Augustine & Zoss, 2006; Faust, 2001); science education (Girod & Wong, 2002; Jakobson & Wickman, 2008; Pugh & Girod, 2007); and social studies (Singer-Gabella, 1995). Among these writers, their usages of Dewey's aesthetic ideas vary. For example, Sharon Augustine and Michelle Zoss (2006) focus on combining Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about flow with Dewey's aesthetic experience, thus denoting "aesthetic flow experiences," while Mark Girod, Cheryl Rau, and Adele Schepige (2003) examine what they call "aesthetic understanding": "a rich network of conceptual knowledge combined with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of ideas that literally transform one's experiences and perceptions" (p. 578).

Nevertheless, common among these various writers is the idea that Dewey's notion of an aesthetic experience refers to something "powerful" (Wong, 2007), or "compelling and dramatic" (Girod, Rau, & Schepige, 2003, p. 578). Imanol Aguirre (2004) calls it a "vital experience" (p. 259). Augustine and Zoss (2006) note that their concept of an aesthetic flow experience can be characterized more easily than defined. Surveying their preservice teachers, they described aesthetic flow experiences as "An a-ha experience," "Being in the zone," and as something that "involves tensions and intensities in terms of emotions" (p. 80). I would add that aesthetic experiences as I characterize them in this article are also difficult to pin down and to neatly define.

In terms of what could be done in classrooms to provide students with the opportunity so that they may have these kinds of powerful experiences,

David Wong (2007) has ten suggestions, which include ideas on provoking imagination, creating a sense of an unfolding of events in which anticipation is fostered so that students feel like detectives, and encouraging students to attend to or even dwell on their feelings in a situation. Wong also offers what he calls provocative ideas, one of which is exploring faith in education. By faith he does not mean a belief in a higher power, but a “firm belief in something for which there is no formal proof. Faith of this kind is critical for deep engagement with new ideas” (p. 214).

Girod, Rau, and Schepige (2003) offer five guidelines for science educators. These include crafting content (“so that content becomes something that is relished” [p. 579] rather than simply portrayed; crafting dispositions [asking students to be imaginative]; artistic expansion of perception [“‘re-seeing’ is an attempt to focus our perception on the nuance and detail of the world” [pp. 579–580]]; teacher modeling appreciation and value for the transformative power of science ideas; and scaffolding efficacy and identity beliefs, which means that teachers must capitalize on students’ identity and efficacy beliefs as they unfold in experiencing a wide range of emotions and dispositions: “Aesthetic understanding forces us to see and think about the world in very unusual ways and initial attempts in this regard must be received in a nurturing way” (p. 580).

I summarize Wong’s and Girod, Rau, and Schepige’s ideas, in particular, to show the reader the kinds of ideas about aesthetic learning experiences that are already circulating. Moreover, I believe they and others offer important correctives about teaching and learning which are important in any era, but especially in these times of high-stakes testing and the usage of narrow types of accountability measures. While it is possible that these practices may improve test scores, more importantly they are likely to actually engage students in subject matter.

The ideas I put forth in this article are an attempt to contribute to this small but growing literature on developing Dewey’s aesthetic theory for educational implications. Because there is some overlap of my work and that in the literature (e.g., imagination and perceptivity [re-seeing], in particular), I hope my research serves to support and encourage these ideas. Moreover, I add four other key themes, which I hope will prove useful to both teachers in classrooms and educational researchers.

DERIVING AESTHETIC THEMES

To reveal the aesthetic themes of a learning experience, I draw largely upon Dewey’s (1934) book, *Art as Experience*.² This seminal text, delivered as lectures at Harvard in 1932, will serve us well to understand art and the creative process. At times, however, Dewey’s interest in a holistic conception of experience and aesthetic experiences keeps him from providing

some analytical distinctions that are useful. On these occasions, I resort to other authors whose ideas fit well with the pragmatic project.

In terms of method, with my doctoral students at the University of Denver, I derived six aesthetic themes from two sources. First, I reflected upon and categorized numerous activities that I had seen artists conduct in their workshops at various Aesthetic Education Institutes over the years.

As I indicated at the start of this article, I have been involved in organizing and teaching in the Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado (AEIC). Over the last 15 years, I had the opportunity to observe approximately 90 artists teach dance, theater, visual art, music or poetry to general K–12 classroom teachers. I've sat in the artists' workshops, and I have listened to them talk about their artistic processes. These observations along with evaluations of the Institutes (Uhrmacher & Bunn, 2004, 2005) and several studies about them (Perlov, 1998; Romero, 1997) convince me that teachers may enhance classroom activities with artistic practices in such a way that the experiences had by students may be called aesthetic.

With the intent of isolating a concise number of themes that teachers could use in their own classrooms, I established about five to seven categories. Had our project been a qualitative study, my students and I could have stopped here with the satisfaction that we found a number of excellent ideas useful for teachers to use in their own classrooms. But I was convinced that there was something greater going on than simply finding a number of good ideas. Already familiar with Dewey's ideas on aesthetics, I believed that the practices I witnessed artists using with participants were directly related to aesthetic experiences themselves because the participants were reporting formally in evaluations and informally in conversations that they were undergoing remarkable experiences.

Thus, the next step in the process was to check our tentative themes against Dewey's descriptions of aesthetic experiences in his text *Art as Experience*. In this iterative process of comparing and contrasting, some themes became clearer and sharper and some fell out of usage. For example, risk taking is an important element at the AEIC. Participants take risks by taking part in all of the art forms (dance, theater, visual art, music, and poetry) and revealing their talents and shortcomings. Next, I examined Dewey's description of an aesthetic experience and asked whether risk taking is (or could be) part of an aesthetic experience. In this case, the idea fit (see risk taking below). But not all of my observations of practices at the Institute worked out as characteristics of an aesthetic experience. For example, teaching participants at the Institute to communicate through a variety of forms of representation (see Eisner, 1994) is a major theme of the AEIC, but this idea could not be abstracted from Dewey's description of an aesthetic experience. Hence, it is still an important idea for the AEIC and for educators in general, but because it is not a characteristic of an aesthetic experience, I discarded it.

In the end, I isolated six characteristics, or themes, of an aesthetic experience. That is, when the artists drew upon some combination of the themes indicated below, they not only were providing participants with good educational activities (as revealed by Institute evaluations), but they were also providing for the possibility of participants having aesthetic learning experiences (as potentially revealed by an analysis of Dewey's ideas on aesthetics). I will subsequently look at these six themes (connections, active engagement, sensory experience, perceptivity risk taking, and imagination) discovered at the Institutes and see if indeed they are grounded in Dewey's ideas.

A VARIETY OF EXPERIENCES

This section examines Dewey's (1938) ideas about experience and learning experiences, as well as aesthetic experiences and aesthetic learning experiences. Dewey's ideas begin with a focus on the concepts of "interaction," "continuity," and "growth" (see pp. 35–36, 51).³ Simply, an experience is an interaction between the person and the environment in which one takes up something from past experiences "and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). By attending to the idea of an interaction between the person and the environment Dewey avoids the dualism of mind/body. The whole person comes in contact with and grasps qualities in the world. By noticing the past, present, and future of an experience, Dewey indicates how people construct and reconstruct what we come to learn and know. When experiences foster growth, we may think of them as educative experiences. When experiences stunt growth, we may refer to these as miseducative because they produce conditions that hinder further interest in learning. Therefore, "everything," says Dewey, "depends upon the quality of experience which is had" (p. 27).

Oftentimes a particular quality pervades an experience, and then upon reflection we refer to our experience by that quality. We say it was intellectual, kinesthetic, emotional, boring, and so on. There are some experiences that we have on occasion which are particularly "sensory" and "enlivened." These same experiences when brought to fruition may be called aesthetic experiences:

In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd . . . the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals. (Dewey, 1934, pp. 4–5)

The term *aesthetics* is derived from the Greek *aesthetikos* and means “capable of sensory perception.” The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1735/1954) circumvented aesthetics as a branch of philosophy dealing with art. But Dewey reinvigorated the term by opening it up to refer to certain kinds of experiences that may be had in any aspect of life—with watching a campfire as well as with looking at impressionist paintings.

If indeed aesthetic experiences take place in all walks of life, then this includes learning situations. Indeed, students may have sensory learning experiences in which they feel “heightened vitality” (Dewey, 1934, p. 19). Is there a way to increase the possibility for students to have such heightened learning experiences instead of ordinary ones? A clue can be found in the way Dewey discusses artists, art, and appreciators of art.

Dewey noted that it is unfortunate that there is not one word describing the experience of artists creating a work of art and a spectator who appreciates it. He pointed out that the experiences undertaken by artists in creating works of art are parallel to the experiences undertaken by appreciators of the works of art (p. 54). According to Dewey, “They are not the same in any literal sense,” but “there is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist” (p. 54) if the experience is to be something more than scattered and unfulfilled. Says Dewey, “The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear” (p. 54). Such *work*,⁴ whether had by the artist or the appreciator, may be called characteristics (themes) of aesthetic experiences. By drawing out the characteristics or themes, teachers are able to enhance classroom activities in numerous ways. I’ll return to this idea at the end of this article after examining the six aesthetic themes that are part of the work needed to be done by artist, appreciator, teacher, or learner to have an aesthetic experience.

Connections

That art weds man and nature is a familiar fact. Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny. (Dewey, 1934, p. 271)

The first aesthetic theme that we will explore is connections, which may be derived from Dewey’s big picture on aesthetic ideas. That is, Dewey offers us the most general abstraction he seems capable of mustering. He points out that an aesthetic experience has the potential of beginning when an individual “interacts” (p. 246) with the environment. When the interaction provides for an integrated experience and when it runs its course to fulfillment, one has what might be called an aesthetic experience. When the connection is not made, an aesthetic experience cannot be had. Dewey says it this way:

When the linkage of the self with its world is broken, then also the various ways in which the self interacts with the world cease to have a unitary connection with one another. . . . Intrinsic connection of the self with the world through reciprocity of undergoing and doing . . . is a . . . main consideration. (p. 247)

Dewey's interest is to reveal a holistic picture of the connections one may have. He points out that the interaction between person and environment is not "merely physical nor merely mental" (p. 246). He writes at some length about there being "no intrinsic psychological divisions between the intellectual and the sensory . . . the emotional and ideational; the imaginative and the practical" (p. 247). It is upon reflection that we may discover that an experience has a dominant quality and can be labeled as imaginative or practical, and so on.

Although Dewey is not particularly interested in subdividing the various ways connections may be had between the person and the environment, Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson (1990) do categorize the kinds of connections that may be had. They make the case for four "modes of experiencing and responding to works of art" (p. 28). These four modes correspond well with Dewey's ideas, and I describe them below because these will prove useful for educators who attempt to provide high-quality aesthetic learning experiences in their classrooms.

In their attempt to understand the aesthetic encounter, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson interviewed 57 art museum officials (mostly curators and directors) about their recent encounters with works of art. Armed with a somewhat Deweyan definition of the aesthetic experience—"the aesthetic experience occurs when information coming from the artwork interacts with information already stored in the viewer's mind" (p. 18)⁵—the authors analyzed the interview data and found that these quite articulate respondents tended to emphasize one of four reactions to a work of art, which Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson refer to as emotional, sensorial,⁶ intellectual, and communicative reactions.

The *emotional* refers to a visceral response to a work of art. The authors point out that emotions seem to be part of every aesthetic experience, but sometimes this mode is dominant. The *intellectual* refers to a cognitive relationship to a work of art. Knowing something about the artist, the technique, or the subject matter of the art work may enhance the experience. By *communicative* Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson suggest that one can relate to a work of art through the artist, the culture, or the time period. They put it this way: "With the help of information, imagination, and empathy, the viewer can in fact share the dreams, the emotions, and the ideas that artists of different times and places have encoded their work" (p. 71). Finally, by *sensorial* Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson refer to the sensory qualities of a work of art: colors, lines, tones, textures, and so forth. Some individuals get caught up in the sensorial qualities of a work of art. All four

types of connections—emotional, intellectual, communicative, and sensorial—characterize relationships between the person and the environment.

One important type of work to be done in having an aesthetic experience is to connect. One must connect in one of the four ways to the world (paintings, movies, sunrises, sunsets, math, and literature) to have a chance at an aesthetic experience.

Active Engagement

The intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged. (Dewey, 1934, p. 5)

Another type of “work,” as Dewey would put it, that must be undergone to have an aesthetic experience may be called active engagement. The artist, the appreciator of art, or the student in the classroom must be engaged with some kind of object focus for almost any kind of worthwhile experience much less an aesthetic experience to be had:

. . . mind forms the background upon which every new contact with surroundings is projected; yet “background” is too passive a word, unless we remember that it is active. . . . This active and eager background lies in wait and engages whatever comes its way so as to absorb it into its own being. (p. 264)

Having focused on the mind, Dewey is quick to point out that it is not mind alone that engages in the world. As we saw earlier, one’s whole being is affected. Stated in the negative sense, Dewey writes that a conception of mind as something isolated from the body “strengthens the conception which isolates the esthetic from those modes of experience in which the body is actively engaged with the things of nature and life” (p. 264). Hence, an aesthetic experience is an active one. According to Dewey, “To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us” (p. 53).

We now have two types of work that must be had to secure an aesthetic experience. Placing these two together, we may say that an individual needs to be actively engaged⁷ and connected to an object (or idea) of focus. The next category is also essential for an aesthetic experience.

Sensory Experience

. . . esthetic effect is found directly in sense-perception. (Dewey, 1934, p. 115)

That an aesthetic experience is a sensory experience can almost be stated without any elaboration, so obvious this fact seems to be. As indicated earlier, the word *aesthetics* is derived from a term that means “capable of sensory perception.” According to Dewey, “The senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about him” (p. 22). And he adds, “Since sense-organs . . . are the means of this participation [of organism and environment], any and every derogation of them . . . is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and dulled life experience” (p. 22). Aesthetic experiences are sensory experiences. Thus a third type of work that must take place for an aesthetic experience to happen is the use of one’s senses.

The question arises as to whether all aesthetic experiences are really sensory. One might wonder, for example, whether some conceptual art works in which the traditional use of the senses to focus on an object is absent, requires a sensory experience. (Imagine John Cage’s piano performance of 4’33” in which his hands rest above the piano keys for 4 minutes and 33 seconds [see Jackson, 1998, pp. 78–87]). The answer, as far as I can tell, is yes. While the idea behind the art may be more important than the sensory experience itself, there is still a sensory experience to be had. In the Cage example, there were the sounds in the room and outside the amphitheater, as well as the visual spectacle of the artist’s hands poised over the keys.

Writer and sculptor Ursula Meyer, for example, in discussing visual art, points out that conceptual art has over time emphasized art-as-idea and art-as-knowledge (see Meyer, 1972, pp. vii–xx), yet in both cases, there is still some kind of documentation that acts as a reference point. In an interview with Meyer, conceptual artist Ian Wilson points out that oral communication can serve as a medium for visual conceptual art. Thus, even with no object at all, reference to an object is in effect. Says Wilson, “Well, when someone says to you: I am working with a cube, you know exactly what he is talking about” (Meyer, 1972, p. 220). Indeed, there is an image of a cube in the mind of the artist as well as the beholder.

While connections, active engagement, and sensory experiences are necessary for an aesthetic experience, the following are also vital. Whether they *must* be part of every aesthetic experience is open to debate.

Perceptivity

Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive. (Dewey, 1934, p. 53)

The fourth theme is based on a type of work called perceptivity. Dewey elaborates at some length on the distinction between two types of observation. He calls these recognition and perception. The latter is part of an aesthetic experience. Says Dewey,

Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a beginning of an act of perception. But this beginning is not allowed to serve the development of full perception of the thing recognized. . . . In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme. (p. 52)

When we arrive home after a day at work, we recognize our house—the lawn, the front door, the garage. Recognition is an important skill in that we should not have to spend time relearning items we encounter daily. The problem, however, says Dewey, is that in recognition we fail to perceive. Racing through an art museum to recognize the Cézanne, the Picasso, the Van Gogh is one thing. To really perceive a given painting by one of these artists is another. To perceive, one must really look, take in the qualities of the painting: its colors, textures, and lines. Says Dewey,

A crowd of visitors steered through a picture-gallery by a guide, with attention called here and there to some high point, does not perceive. . . . For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. (p. 54)

Thus, related to a sensory experience is the work of perceptivity. Stated differently, the sensory experience allows for perceptivity, and perceptivity allows for the building up of one's own experience. An artist builds her experience through the creation of a painted canvas. Through the addition and deletion of paint, lines, and textures, one's experiences are constructed and recorded. The percipient builds his experience by seeing and looking at the canvas. This seeing and looking is a characteristic of an aesthetic experience and it takes place over time as one interacts with the work of art. Often it takes a while to really see the nuances of artworks.

Risk Taking

There is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions whose funded result constitutes the meanings with which we grasp and understand what is now occurring. Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of the past. (Dewey, 1934, p. 272)

Another type of work that takes place in an aesthetic experience is a venture into the unknown, which as Dewey points out, entails risk. Any type of exploration involves risk, whether it is high, medium, or low. Almost by definition, artists are explorers. They may investigate their subconscious or the world around them. They may choose to create something that provokes society or fits into society, but in either case risk is involved because one is uncertain how the artwork will be perceived and welcomed.

Creating art is an uncertain affair, but how, one might ask, is appreciating art risky? Where is the risk in having a private aesthetic experience? The answer to these questions lies in the risk of opening up of oneself to something new—a new experience in understanding someone else’s experience. Greene (1978) has referred to such experiences as “wide-awakeness.” Whether one reads Alice Walker, Thomas Pynchon, or Robert Frost, or one scrutinizes a painting by Willem de Kooning, Georgia O’Keefe, or Pablo Picasso, one remains open to new possibilities and new ways of seeing. The willingness to be open is the place in which risk is involved.

Imagination

Aesthetic experience is imaginative . . . all conscious experience has of necessity some degree of imaginative quality. (Dewey, 1934, p. 272)

One more type of work to address is imagination, the sixth theme. Imagination from Dewey’s standpoint is “a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole. It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination” (p. 267). Once again, Dewey provides the big picture of how to think about imagination in an aesthetic experience. Dewey then continues to characterize imagination through the usage of Samuel Coleridge’s work. Indeed, Coleridge’s ideas about imagination will prove pragmatically useful for the present discussion. I use Coleridge’s ideas to think about types of imagination, distinctions that will prove useful for educators.

First, we may distinguish a type of imagination called *fancy*,⁸ which refers to the manipulation of qualities. For example, we can imagine a cow and give it a purple color. Then we can imagine the cow walking on a sidewalk in New York City. It lifts its two front legs and it starts dancing. This kind of imaginative work is fanciful.

The second type of imagination I prefer to call *intuitive*; Coleridge (1817/1983) calls it primary. He says, “The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” (p. 304). This type refers to experiences in which there is a feeling that the artwork has been created in the cosmos or from a muse. Some Inuit woodcarvers talk about finding the animal inside the piece of wood. Coleridge, as another example, wrote most of “Kubla Khan” in a drug-induced burst of intuition. The young Bob Dylan often spoke about how he could write a song in just a few minutes. All of these examples refer to experiences in which a person feels as though he or she is a conduit for a work of art to express itself. Dewey (1934) believes these acts of spontaneity are not in the cosmos but in the “result of long periods of activity”:

Subconscious maturation precedes creative production in every line of human endeavor. . . . At different times we brood over different things; we entertain purposes that, as far as conscious is concerned are independent, being each appropriate to its own occasion. . . . Yet as they all proceed from one living creature they are somehow bound together below the level of intention. They work together, and finally something is born almost in spite of conscious personality. . . . When patience has done its perfect work, the man is taken possession of by the appropriate muse and speaks and sings as some god dictates. (p. 72)

Whether we believe the ideas are really from a muse or from our pent-up subconscious meanings, we may refer to such experiences as intuitive imaginations.

Finally, we may also think of an *interactive* type of imagination, which is the workhorse of experience. Coleridge calls it secondary, “an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will” (Coleridge, 1817/1983, p. 304). An artist engages with material and there is a dialogue that takes place. When a writer, for instance, writes one sentence, the infinite world of possibilities closes down. Now the narrative has a voice in what can be said—what seems likely and probable. As the writer interacts with the material she uses her imagination. She tries things out. She takes risks. Sometimes the ideas work and sometimes they do not. In this sense imagination is interactive.

While the artist exhibits imagination, what about the appreciator of a work of art? We don’t often think of the appreciator as imaginative, but Dewey notes that when an appreciator really has an artful experience, he or she reconstructs the ideas and emotions that the artist placed in the work of art in the first place. According to Dewey (1934),

For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. . . . The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. (p. 54)

To reconstruct a work of art requires imagination. Dewey said that imagination concentrates and enlarges “an immediate experience” (p. 273). Such an enlargement may take place in any of the three ways just mentioned. One may engage with a work of art in a fanciful way, actually adding and subtracting to what the artist created. Or the experience may be one of an immediate burst of understanding—just getting it. Or the experience may take some interactive work.

AN EXAMPLE

As part of an ongoing research project, I had the opportunity to watch two elementary school teachers, who were familiar with these six themes,

implement them in their classrooms (see Moroye & Uhrmacher, 2009, in press). Using the qualitative research method of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Eisner, 1997), a colleague and I observed their classrooms for 3 weeks and conducted numerous formal and informal interviews before and after classes. Our guiding question was: How do teachers use the aesthetic themes in orchestrating their practice? By “orchestrating their practice” we mean the collective and varied enterprise of conceiving, planning, implementing, adapting, and evaluating curricula to produce a desired effect (see Moroye & Uhrmacher [2009] for a more elaborate explanation of the research project and its methods).

Some of the themes play themselves out in the classroom of one third-grade teacher teaching astronomy to 18 students. Claire⁹ teaches in a middle-class suburban elementary school that also serves as an English language learner (ELL) magnet school.

Claire asks her students, “What’s a constellation?” There are numerous responses from the students. One says, “a shape,” and another, “a picture.” Claire writes on the board: A group of stars that makes a picture that’s been named. “Raise your hand,” she says, “if you know the big dipper.” A lot of hands go up. “It’s like a soup ladle,” she adds.

The students and teacher talk about numerous constellations—Orion, Pegasus, Queen Victoria. “Huh?” says Claire. “I haven’t heard of that one.” Claire informs students that constellations are tied to gods and goddesses, Greek myths, and astrological signs: “Orion, for example, is about a handsome and famous hunter who fell in love with a goddess.”

In their “space” books—individual journals—Claire has students write the word *constellation* and its definition. Next to the definition, they draw a picture of the big dipper. But Claire adds, “If you already did something different that is fine.”

After a few minutes Claire says, “I’m going to talk while some of you finish writing. We’re going to make our own constellations. I made mine last night. Take out a black piece of paper. Take a small handful of rock salt. I’m going to toss it on the black paper and then I’m going to look and see if something comes to me. Don’t have an idea in advance.”

She shows her example on the overhead. One student says he sees a policeman. Someone else sees a horse. “Next,” says Claire, “glue down these pieces of salt.” After that she tells them to draw lines and come up with a story about their picture. “It’s not going to be perfect. That’s what is fun about this. We have to use our imaginations.”

In this activity on constellations, which lasted about 20 minutes, we see Claire incorporating the various themes we discussed. She tries to engage her students in the content intellectually (e.g., “What’s a constellation?”), sensorial (drawing pictures, creating rock salt pictures), communicatively (e.g., Claire made a picture herself), and emotionally (through the stories). The activity is sensory based and encourages students to be actively engaged. She encourages them to use their imaginations and in short, take risks by messing about with the rock salt and glue.

In one interview, she stated in regard to the themes: “I think . . . gosh, they’re all important. I think the active engagement is critical for any teaching. If kids aren’t really into it they’re not going to take much away and if they don’t have any connection to the material, then it has no meaning for them.” She adds,

We know that kids learn in different ways, like multiple intelligences and different learning styles, and things like that. I think this gets to that too.

I have a couple students who it’s really hard to engage and so I worry that they will be a little bit bored with space by the end of it, but my hope is to kind of go the other direction and that they don’t want to stop the unit.

Claire’s goal is that of Dewey’s (1938) notion of growth—students will desire to keep learning.

One theme that has not yet been elaborated upon is perceptivity. I have saved this for last because the following activity from Claire’s classroom provides an exemplary example of its usage.

It is 6 days after the last activity and Claire chose to use the theme of perceptivity, and by extension sensory experience, in teaching her 20 students about the kind of ice cream astronauts eat in space. The mini-lesson went as follows:

First, she had her students imagine eating regular ice cream and describe how it tasted. Students came up with words such as “cold,” “creamy,” “soft,” “icy,” “sweet,” and that it comes in a “lot of colors.” Students generated about 15 words and there was some discussion about a few of them. When one student, for example, wanted to add “bitter” to describe unsweetened cocoa, Claire suggested that they keep to the description of ice cream and not toppings.

Then she gave each of her students the space ice cream and had them describe what they noticed before eating it. The students noted that it was “sticky,” “hard,” “dry,” “light weight,” “flakey,” “room temperature,” and “sticky—even to itself.” Then the students ate it and added descriptors such as:

“It tastes like ice cream”;
“It melts in our mouth”;
“The chocolate tastes like fudge”;
“It sticks to your teeth”;
“It sticks to your tongue.”

Claire said to me that without the idea of perceptivity, she would have given the students the space ice cream at the end of the lesson as a kind of treat, without any sensory elaboration. Consequently the students might not have thought much about their experiences. But the theme of perceptivity encouraged her to dig deeper into the activity of eating ice cream manufactured for space travel and as a result push the experience itself so that the students were both conscious of the activity and reflective about it.

One point to learn from this episode is that by moving toward providing students with an aesthetically oriented activity, students had a rich and enlivened lesson. It may not be the case that any of the students actually had an aesthetic experience in the way Dewey might characterize it, but by shifting the activity toward an aesthetically oriented one, the potential results have an opportunity to be realized. To make this point by analogy, consider the fact that one may not have a “wow” experience by viewing the “Mona Lisa.” Nevertheless, the experiences leading up to the observation, the observation itself, and the ruminations following the observation may all lead to something that is enjoyable, edifying, and memorable.

Dewey (1934) noted that the “non-esthetic lies within two limits. At one pole is the loose succession that does not begin at any particular place and that ends . . . at no particular place. At the other pole is arrest, constriction, proceeding from parts having only a mechanical connection with one another” (p. 40). That there are two poles indicates that aesthetic experiences exist on a continuum. For our purposes what is important to learn here is that when teachers aim toward providing students with aesthetic learning experiences, they may reach their educational goals (as indicated below) even though each student may not have what could be called a “wow” experience. There are numerous rungs on the ladder of aesthetically oriented learning experiences, but I argue that each rung has the potential to provide an enlivened educational experience.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

What happens when we engage in an aesthetic education in the classroom? First, I’d like to point out that teachers employing these themes ought to use them in conjunction with each other. While it is not yet clear just what combination of these themes needs to work together to enhance classroom activities, I do believe that using these themes together augments the possibilities. It does seem that connections, active engagement, and sensory experiences are three themes that must be present. In addition, teachers may utilize the themes by incorporating them in their lesson plans or they may draw upon them in the moment. In regard to the former, I suggest that teachers specifically include these themes in their lesson planning. Teachers may ask themselves, Where is the risk taking? Or, How can I ensure that students take charge of their own learning rather than having ideas thrust upon them? In regard to teaching on the fly, if the teacher notices that the activity is not working, she might draw on several themes, as though pulling levers of paint, to coat the educational activity. I would suggest that when doing so, one is able to improve the activity. Finally, reflection by the students is a key experience that ought to be included in aesthetically oriented lessons. Claire had students reflect on their experiences of eating ice cream.

A number of important effects may result from aesthetically oriented lessons and these can be derived analytically. These effects, by the way, are ones that I believe most teachers desire. Whether one teaches in a Core Knowledge school, a charter school dedicated to the arts or to other interests such as science and technology, most teachers would want these penultimate aims: student satisfaction, an increase in perceptual knowledge, episodic memory retention, meaning making, and creativity and innovation. Admittedly, as I present the aesthetic ideas in this article, I can be accused of setting forth formalistic ideas (Hirsch, 1996) since I refrain from suggesting an educational aim or goal. While I personally ascribe to much of Dewey's progressive ideas, updated by Tanner (1997), and reinvigorated by Unger and West (1998) in their call to "rescue the child from the limitations of its class and family situation, giving it access to a world of longer memory, broader imagination, and stronger ambition" (p. 58), I remain attentive to the fact that, as I said at the outset of this article, I engage with educators who have a variety of educational ends they wish to meet.

I should note that the points below are not a full list of what may be attained through aesthetic learning experiences, but rather a beginning. What follows is the conceptual framework that drives my current research. That is, because the ideas below follow conceptually from the characteristics of an aesthetic learning experience, these are the outcomes that I believe I'll find. As my colleagues, doctoral students, and I continue to conduct research on these outcomes, more will be known soon. I welcome others to join me in my empirical quest, but in the meantime, let's look at the analytic arguments.

First, an aesthetic learning experience provides the possibility for student satisfaction. When students are connected to the subject matter they are learning and find a kind of engagement in the sensory experiences they are undergoing, there is joy in the educational process. Although discussing what happens when an aesthetic experience is truncated, Dewey (1934) implicates joy in an aesthetic experience in the following passage: "Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of the aesthetic" (p. 27).¹⁰ By providing aesthetic learning experiences, then, we should see an increase in the joy of learning. The upshot of joy in learning is that students may desire to keep on learning that particular subject. Perhaps they will become lifelong learners in that area of study.

Second, I believe there is an increase in what psychologists call episodic memories. This argument is based on current brain research, and I believe it is compatible, although clearly narrower in focus than Dewey's holistic rendering of learning experiences. Briefly, episodic memories allow us to recall the "personal incidents that uniquely define our lives" (Schacter, 1996, p. 17). Current theory of how the brain works stresses the links

among all its components and their interdependence. We naturally experience the world in a multisensory way. This multisensory way of apprehending the world promotes long-term memory. Long-term memories are really permanent structural changes in neurons that promote activation of other neurons that were a part of some sensory experience. Repeated, intense stimulation brings about these changes. This activation can come from the eyes, ears, nose, or any of the senses. The more senses directly involved in the activation, the stronger and longer brain neurons are stimulated and the more enduring are the memories (Kandel, 2007). An event that produces strong visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, and olfactory sensations will activate more cortical neurons for a longer time and produce more permanent connections than an event that has strong visual and auditory sensations but weak kinesthetic or tactile ones. The essential reason why some events are remembered better than others is that the better remembered occasions involve more intense and varied sensory experiences and produce more connections among cortical neurons (Mark, 1992). Thus, sensory experiences are crucial for long-term memory.¹¹ Moreover, in addition to joy in learning, we should also find an increase in episodic memory retention. Subsequently, we may find everything from an increase in standardized test scores to a truly deepened understanding of subject matter, the latter of which is not necessarily reflected in the former.

Third, there ought to be an increase in what we might call perceptual knowledge. There is a direct link between perceptivity and the building of concepts and facts. This argument has been elaborated by Rudolph Arnheim (1989) as well as Eisner (1994b). In short, the more one sees, the more one is able to make fine-grained distinctions. The more one distinguishes, the more one comes to know—literally. Someone who “recognizes” that grass is green knows little of the variety of greens found in a blade of grass. By seeing and looking—really perceiving—one comes to know that a blade of grass is made of a variety of shades of green as well as brown, yellow, and perhaps even blue. Perceptivity provides for discrimination, which allows for an increase in knowledge through subtle distinctions. We might refer to this kind of knowledge as perceptual. We witnessed an example of this in Claire’s classroom with the ice-cream activity. Claire’s students knew much more about the sensory qualities of space ice cream having undergone an activity that required them to pay attention.

A fourth outcome from aesthetically oriented learning experiences is meaning making. Meaning making refers to the idea that students have found some value in what they have learned that has personal consequences. Aesthetic experiences expand our horizons and can contribute meaning and worth to future experiences. Meaning making refers to the idiosyncratic stamp a student puts on the subject matter being learned. Meaning making also refers to the idiosyncratic stamp a student puts on the subject matter being expressed (Eisner, 1998). That is, we usually ask what

can the subject contribute to the child, but we often forget to inquire as to what the child can contribute to the subject matter. Such meaning making is enhanced through activities that involve connections, risk, and imagination. One must first find the subject matter interesting. The student must find a connection with it. Second, the student needs to work the subject matter—transform it, which involves both risk and imagination. The risk may be low level, but it comes into play in the sense that one must take a chance particularly when expressing the newly realized meaning. The potential outcome of meaning making is finding greater relevance in the material being taught.

Finally, aesthetic experiences provide for the possibility of creativity and innovation, two qualities stressed as being useful—in fact arguably, mandatory—in the work world (Pink, 2006).¹² By creativity I mean that one is able to bring forth something new for the person who is doing the creative work. Creativity should be seen from a personally referenced criterion. The creative work does not need to be seen as new for the world, but new for the person undergoing the process. By innovation, I mean that one brings something new into the world. To be creative, one needs to be imaginative. Imagination, as we saw earlier, refers to the fact that one has the internal abilities to mess about, channel, or manipulate ideas or qualities. Creative people are imaginative, but imaginative people are not necessarily creative. Some people have an active inner life but cannot bring it out into the world. Therefore, while the theme of imagination alone may not lead to creativity, the themes of imagination and risk taking combined are more likely to encourage creativity.

CONCLUSION

The more a teacher is able to encourage a classroom community that embraces these themes, the more likely it will be that the students, and the teacher, grow from the experience. *Active engagement, sensory experience, connections, imagination, perceptivity, and risk taking* are conditions that encourage aesthetic experiences. It is these experiences that seem to support deep engagement as well as memory retention, an increase in knowledge, student satisfaction, meaning making and creativity. Connecting the dots, of course, is the research agenda that needs to be done. I have shown the relationships analytically. Now we need empirical studies examining whether these themes do indeed lead to these potential outcomes. Moreover, conceptually speaking we still need to examine several analytical relationships. First, are all of these themes equally important or are some more significant than others? In addition, what is the relationship between reflection and the aesthetically oriented activities? Is reflection part of the activity or something that comes afterward? At the moment, I believe it is the latter. Also, I have not discussed the importance of the classroom

culture in setting up the possibility for these aesthetically oriented activities. In fact, the sociocultural perspectives that stem from Dewey's ideas deserve examination. Imagination and perception have collective, social, or cultural dimensions. These could be explored.

Dewey (1934) believed that students need to be actively involved in their education, and he encouraged educators to ensure that situations encouraged growth. It is therefore imperative, regardless of what the ultimate goals a school or district embrace, that educators recognize and take advantage of these themes, as they can enliven and enrich the classroom experience.

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NOTES

1. "Borrowing" ideas and strategies depends on understanding the context from which an idea initiates and the motivating rationale behind it and knowing how the idea will play out in its new context, which includes awareness of aesthetic preferences (Uhrmacher, 1997).
2. My aim is to examine Dewey's notion of an aesthetic experience and this text, which is Dewey's most "systematic consideration of the arts" (Jackson, 1998, p. xi) does so quite well. For those interested in a synthesis of Dewey's ideas on the arts generally from his various writings over the years, including *Art as Experience*, see Jackson's (1998) *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*.
3. Dewey characterized experience in other ways, including metaphysical ones, but these will not be examined here (see Bernstein, 1966).
4. A better metaphor might have been "play," but in this article I stick with the term "work" because I believe Dewey was pointing out that an aesthetic experience is not to be taken lightly—it involves effort. Play, of course, can be seen as serious business, but this point must be saved for another time.
5. Dewey's influence on Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson is debatable, but I believe their "interactionist" approach to aesthetics is similar to Dewey's.
6. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson use the term *perceptual*, but to avoid confusion with the themes of perceptivity and sensory experience, I use *sensorial*.
7. One could argue that aesthetic learning experiences as I describe them lead to engagement because of the theme of active engagement alone. But I believe that active engagement requires the other themes to provide "deep" or aesthetic engagement.

8. For present purposes it is not important that Coleridge (1817/1983, p. 305) used this term to refer to a mode of memory.
9. The name “Claire” is a self-chosen pseudonym by the teacher.
10. Dewey discusses negative aesthetic experiences briefly. But his frequent use of terms such as *joy* and *satisfying* in relation with aesthetic experiences certainly suggests that he is much more concerned with positive ones. Admittedly, I am more concerned with joyful learning experiences.
11. Thanks to Marty Tombari for helping me understand current research in brain theory and how it supports aesthetic education.
12. Sir Ken Robinson (2006) distinguishes creativity (the process of having original ideas) from innovation (putting ideas into practice).

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