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Attunement to the Creating Process in Teaching & Learning

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Acknowledgment: I wish to fully acknowledge the commitment and enthusiasm of participating teachers, students, and school administration at the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, Calgary Board of Education, Calgary, Alberta, Canada from 1997 to 2001. We shared a common understanding of the importance and significances of the aesthetic in teaching and learning. All examples of student/teacher work included are the products of research participants at the Creative Arts Center. A special thank you is extended to these participants who so generously shared their curricular activities and thinking.

The Act of Creating

The act of creating can hold strangling preconceptions. Tightly associated with the arts, creating is often considered to be the exclusive realm of the artist. The object of attention becomes the completed creation and not the act of creating. As such, the act of creating can be foreign and limiting, confined to vague notions of the beautiful and sublime. Contrary to this, my own sense of creating is grounded in a close relationship, an ongoing conversation between material(s) and myself as artist. While including a sense of the beautiful and sublime, I have experienced the act of creating to be more comprehensively active meaning making. Through exploration, adaptation, manipulation, and alteration I seek pattern, order, and meaning as I create. A significance endures for me through the creating experience that I cannot dismiss. I characterize this significance as a conscious awareness of the presence of fragility. For example, as I

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create with clay on the potter's wheel I am keenly aware of the fragility of my creating experience. While the wheel spins, the heel of my left hand does most of the work as I begin to center the mound of clay. I keep the left arm firmly braced and grasp the clay in both hands with my thumbs resting on top. I respond to the speed of the wheel, the clay's moisture content, concomitantly pressing forward with my left hand and down with my right hand. Suddenly, I watch the clay body take on a life of its own. Separated from me, it spins out of control. Once again, I ready the clay and initiate the centering process. I press the clay into a cone shaped mound. I feel for bumps or irregularities. I know by the feel when it is centered. Perfect centering is crucial for all work on the potter's wheel. The mound of clay now looks as though it were standing still as it continues to spin on the wheel. Through centering the clay on the potter's wheel, I attain a fragile balance. It is a fragility that is central in many respects: central in the sense of a fixed center around which the clay body revolves; central in the sense that it is a critical step in the evolution of the clay body; central in the sense that as the form is shaped and reshaped the center becomes more central, yet increasingly hidden and more uncertain. I have touched the center. I have maintained the center. And yet, the onlooker may respond to the piece, ignorant of this center.

The character of *fragility* makes most people nervous. A shattered, weak, perishable item; a delicate frame or character; life's fragility, are images that flood one's mind. Undoubtedly, *fragility* stirs much unease in educational communities. The concern for certainties does not embrace such a tentative, contingently held notion. And yet, I have become increasingly aware that fragility can harbor qualities that strengthen through attunement to the creating process. I believe this fragile nature of the creating act is paradoxically its strength; such attunement demands openness to the perception, selection, and responsiveness to qualities throughout the making process. Similarly, as I participated with teachers and students negotiating curriculum likewise at the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, the Calgary Board of Education (choosing to value the creating process, primary to the arts, within the middle school as a whole; <http://www.cbe.ab.ca/sss/programs/prog-arts-ed.asp#mwcreative>), I saw the continual creation of space for teaching and learning perpetuating this fragile nature. The ruptures and interruptions demanded attunement to process. Teachers constantly facilitated learning connections with students.

The Inquiry Process at the Creative Arts Centre

I was attracted to the Creative Arts Centre's operating definition of the aesthetic emphasizing creating and discovery across curricula. Over a two-year period, alongside three teachers and 26 students, I pursued what this meant for teachers and students, and how the aesthetic might

be embodied in teachers' and students' discourses and discursive patterns.¹ The data consisted of on-going interviews with all participants, student work/artifacts, teacher work/artifacts, and multiple classroom observations. Throughout this search, reflexivity was considered essential to the research process providing a means to address the interface between the empirical data collected and its interpretations. Alvesson and Skoldberg² (2000) describe such reflexive interpretation involving interaction between:

interpretations of a hermeneutic kind, which in turn are subjected to critical scrutiny followed by rhetorical self-analysis and an attempt to tackle the problems of text and authority by opening up the text more clearly: drawing out ambiguities in ways of dealing with the subject matter, indicating limitations and arbitrariness in what is being represented. (p. 255)

The interface between the empirical data and these different interpretations was pursued through ongoing interaction between philosophical/theoretical frameworks and the concrete realities of taking aesthetic considerations seriously in a teaching/learning situation. Centering this reflexivity was a similar sense of fragility as I experienced as a potter. It was not fixed in the sense that the fragile balance was always shifting depending on circumstances/contexts. But, it was fixed in the sense that fragility had to be present—a genuine, integral constant of aesthetic space. I desire to render with more clarity this invisible fragility embodied within the visible nature of aesthetic experience for teachers and students at the Creative Arts Centre. Simultaneously extending beyond, and permeating within the visible present, the invisible harbors fragility that forms and reforms aesthetic teaching/learning acts.

Aesthetic Play: A Teaching/Learning Style

My attention was drawn to the awareness that the act of creating precipitated for teachers and students. I characterize this awareness as aesthetic play. Aesthetic play was the dominant teaching/learning style in observed classrooms. I use the term style as Garrison³ associated it with creativity and mode of being (p. 42). Aesthetic play refers to attunement to the creating process grounded in the act of making as taken up similarly by Bakhtin,⁴ Gadamer,⁵ and Dewey.⁶ Bakhtin's⁷ fundamental notion is that from within the act or deed, participatory thinking orients individuals. Therefore, an organization emerges in accord with the development of the act itself. Gadamer's⁸ understanding of play as distinct from self and other reminds me that play has a spirit of its own to which participants must attend and take up. As such, it resists means and ends and is reliant on the performance. Gadamer⁹ claims

transformed subjectivities emerge from play, taking something new away from the process. Dewey's¹⁰ notion of experience as a fully human activity, a way of living in the world that does not separate knowledge from interest, nor theory from practice, but insists on a pervasive qualitative whole, emphasizes the vital movement integral to aesthetic play. He further emphasizes that aesthetic play is experienced as connected with all parts linked, not succeeding one another. The implied unity and movement are critical to understanding such experience as a *moving force* acknowledging past, present, and implications for the future.¹¹ Initiating, sustaining, and enhancing links between students and learning through aesthetic play was central in these classrooms. Students and teachers took up aesthetic play as a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification between self and subject matter. This entailed teachers and students developing sensitivity to the many nuances and possibilities present in learning situations and a willingness to play along with them.

Teachers, students, and myself (as researcher) grappled with how aesthetic play constituted learning experiences in particular ways. Attending to aesthetic play as a teaching/learning style was difficult for teachers and students. Teachers kept at it claiming aesthetic play to be a worthwhile struggle for themselves and their students. I was constantly reminded in participating classrooms at the Creative Arts Centre of the difficulty of living this way in classrooms. I was also reminded at moments in participating classrooms, of the movement of aesthetic play and its potential power in teaching and learning. Touching the movement of aesthetic play in its entirety always felt just beyond my grasp. I fear the words I write flatten the fullness of what I encountered. And yet, the strength of some of these encounters was undeniable. An unsettled, fragile spirit was evoked through aesthetic play that was paradoxical, with strength and fragility rarely acknowledged as existing simultaneously. I developed a tremendous respect for the fragility confronted through aesthetic play. It is to this struggle of shaping and giving expression to the fragility of aesthetic play that my attention now turns.

For teachers, aesthetic play meant a confidence in encountering learning through involvement in the creating process. By confidence, I refer to Dewey's¹² sense of confidence denoting "not conscious trust in the efficacy of one's powers but unconscious faith in the possibilities in the situation. It signifies rising to the needs of the situation." Teachers attempted to model this in their classrooms facilitating such confidence in their students. Teachers searched for ways to draw students in to the depth and complexity of subject matter, positioning students to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations of self and subject matter on an ongoing basis. Time was a necessary aspect in order for teachers and

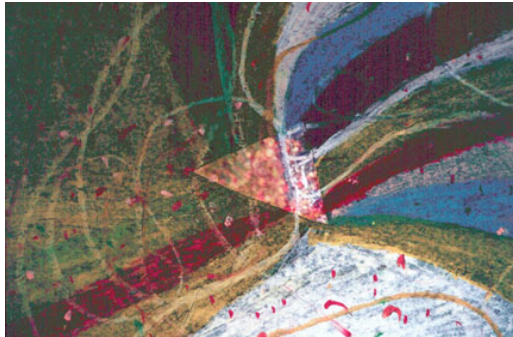
students to be able to dwell in learning situations long enough to wonder, question, and actively participate in learning encounters.

For students, aesthetic play meant a willingness to approach learning as a venture, placing value on curiosity, interests, and commitment to search for meanings through artistic processes. Students had to assume a good part of the responsibility for maintaining involvement in their learning. Students had to respect and value difference and diversity. Students took pleasure interacting with others and varied subject matter, becoming comfortable with learning being more open-ended and interdisciplinary.

For teachers and students, aesthetic play as a teaching/learning style seemed dependent on the confluence of the following interactive qualities. These qualities appeared to form a context that supported and fostered aesthetic play. To illustrate, some concrete examples from students and teachers are provided as a means to gain insights into how these qualities might manifest themselves in practices.

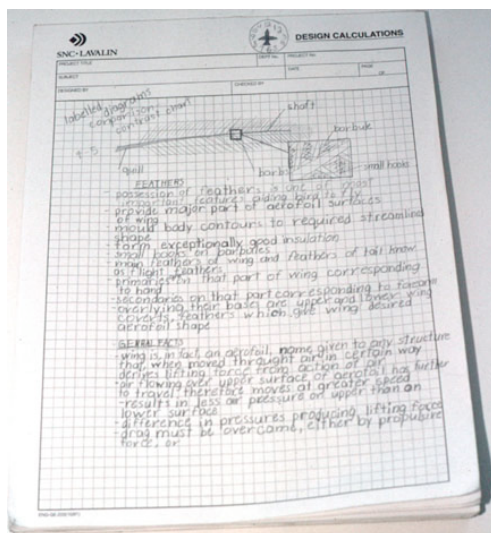
Attentiveness

Through close observation and given time to dwell with and in learning situations, attentiveness was a willingness on teachers' and students' parts to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations resulting in greater deliberation and thoughtful responses.



Personal Involvement

All learning intercepts with personal experience. Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience. Therefore, there are multiple ways in which the world can be known. Divergent ways of approaching learning are respected and encouraged by teachers and in turn by students.



Emotional Commitment

Aesthetic play was about discovery. The discovery was neither an object or a concept, but an attitude or way of being that acted as a catalyst to learning. Teachers modeled a serious, positive attitude and intensity towards learning that necessitated involvement and participation by all. Emotional commitment was needed, focusing student attention on the task and attending closely to the work at hand. This learning took on a personal significance when commitment was present. Without it, I observed learning to be potentially routine, mechanical, and inert.

Making Sense Through Dance

Listening to music surfaced images, memories, colors, and shapes in students' minds. These thoughts elicited emotional responses and students were encouraged to seek physical movement that seemed fitting. Students responded to the movements of their classmates as collectively they immersed body and mind within the felt music creating a dance form documented on video and also in the markings of body paint worn by students. This project was recalled repeatedly by participating students as one of the most personally significant learning experiences.



Felt Freedom

Aesthetic play needed space and freedom. A learning space that allowed students some liberalities in the ways they chose to engage in learning contributed to a spirit of inquiry. It was the liberation of learning from the confines of mere rote responses, categorization, routine, and hierarchical sequentiality.

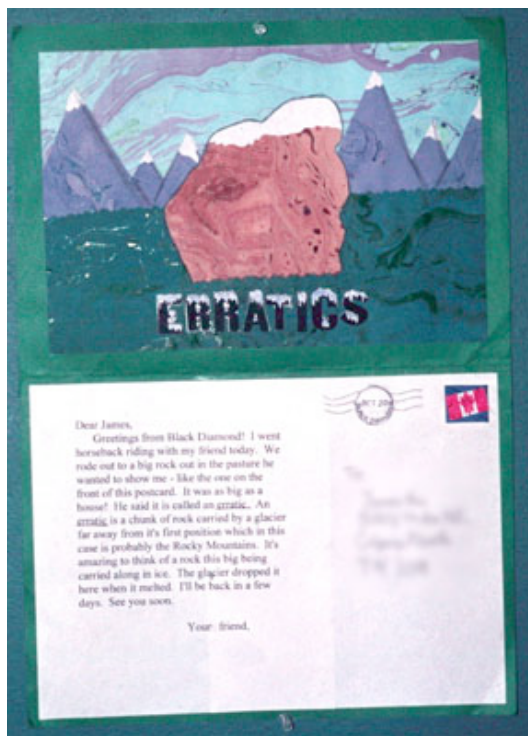
Dialogue

Felt freedom constructed a pattern of thought. Dialogues with self and others were crucial. The discourse entered into became the link to sense making. It suggested an organization for the inquiry to take. This meant succumbing to the process. In so doing, students and teacher gave up exclusive control. Control became a shared venture. Purpose for learning became a cooperative undertaking.

Inquiry Guided

I observed that teachers thought through and around learning situations anticipating many possibilities. This advance thinking engaged teachers in finding resources, materials, and background information that supported many possibilities and were a springboard to unanticipated ones. Teachers enjoyed the creating experience in developing teaching/learning situations and wanted students to experience this sense too. Thus, the organization for learning emerged from the play itself. It was always in the making. As such, it required openness to

possibilities, attentive listening, and responding. It was a search process that was inquiry guided. The process determined the form or manner of representation as it evolved. Learning was a venture process for teachers and students. In the artifact below, students were positioned to be landform detectives as they investigated one specific type. Their inquiry process was documented in a postcard from their landform revealing pertinent information and an opportunity to internalize the found information. Each postcard took on a life of its own as they were shared with others, facilitating unexpected learning connections and directions.



Projection

Teachers reported planning activities deliberately to provide students with a wider familiarity with concepts, exposing them to new ways of thinking and working. Such exposure, exploration, and projection seemed to expand the possibilities students drew on and through. Many students commented that they really enjoyed imagining things as possibly being so. Encouraging projection meant students did not plan all aspects of their learning endeavor to begin with. Time was taken to allow for discovering potential and letting ideas emerge. This permitted possibilities to be included during the search. This encouraged openness

to new ideas and an acceptance of alternatives. Greater flexibility of approach and a willingness to entertain several ideas was observed and documented over the course of the year. Thus, play led students to be able to posit alternative possibilities. Without a playful approach to thinking it seemed that imaginative thought, requiring speculation and conjecturing about possibilities, might not be possible.

Self Consciousness

Relations between self and subject matter were continually addressed. I observed and documented many students whose self-concept and regard for themselves as learners reflected a dramatic growth through the course of the inquiry. Thus, aesthetic play fostered a greater sense of self as a learner and thinker.

Aesthetic Play: A Living Shape

Schiller¹³ refers to a phenomenon he terms *living shape* suggesting, “only as the form of something lives in our sensation, and its life takes form in our understandings, is it living shape. . . .” (p. 76). His portrayal resonates with the movement of aesthetic play in classrooms. The living shape created an organic space to play with ideas, search for connections, and see possibilities for students and teachers. Students and teachers were players in this aesthetic space with these qualities of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogic, inquiry guided, projective, and self-consciousness, folding, unfolding, and feeding back into each other and themselves.

The movement created by these folding and unfolding qualities was shaped by aesthetic play, from which, through which, and into which, meanings were kept in flux. A play of meanings emerged animated with movement and life. As students and teachers yielded to this movement, they learned to act/think within “the accordances and limitations of medium.”¹⁴ Fragility was necessarily present acting as a catalyst in this ongoing attunement between the arising conditional accordances and limitations. But, I was increasingly aware that it was not the identified qualities that were fragile, but rather, the movement in-between these qualities. Underlying this dynamic were tenuous and delicate relationships occurring in the space between students, teachers, subject matter, context, and processes. Meanings were generated within these relationships. Each brought forth characteristics of the other. In so doing, students and teachers found themselves absorbed in relations that could never be reduced to rule. And yet, hidden rules emerged, a direction revealed, within the integrative acts themselves. Understandings were precipitated between and within this vital movement.

Dunne¹⁵ ponders, “It is in fact the source of this movement that we have all the time been glimpsing in understanding itself and which has, moreover, all the time been making itself felt in our own attempt to understand it.” I am struck by how aptly Dunne’s portrayal parallels my attempt to understand the movement of aesthetic play felt and experienced with students and teachers at the Creative Arts Centre. My further search for the source of this movement uncovers three pervading patterns. First, there was a pattern of fundamental involvement by all those participating in teaching/learning situations. Aesthetic play revealed genuine participation thriving through curiosity, passion, watchfulness, thoughtfulness, and courage. Thus, an implicit expectation of aesthetic play was that learning was a close encounter between self and other. This intimacy seemed to breed wonder and delight as well as reconciliation and tentativeness in learning. A restless search for meaning characterized the participation expected, dependant on such vitality and vulnerability.

Second, there was a pattern with regard to the interpretive nature of each participant’s involvement in the world. The present seemed constructed on the basis of a significant past; the past seemed reconstructed on the basis of the present. An on-going play between one’s past and present revealed itself in a particular way of knowing, seeing, and acting in the world. As Dewey¹⁶ claims, this play is immediate “but its content consists of a mediation of present materials by ideas drawn from the past experience.”

Third, there was a pattern of reciprocity between subject and world in which participants acknowledge the conjuncture of qualities making a situation unique. Reciprocity entailed the continual improvising of relations between self and other. It required attunement to the specificity of situations. It demanded that participants be present within the moment, taking in, receiving, and acting as situations called forth.

I believe these three underlying patterns are constituted within Merleau-Ponty’s¹⁷ notion of embodied knowledge—the knowledge acquired through our body’s exploration of the world. Merleau-Ponty grounds embodied knowledge in perception, a synthesis of thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting. Embodied knowledge brings thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting into a vital relationship. The dynamic interchange is aesthetic play—perception and its complement, expression, intertwined in a body-world relationship. Merleau-Ponty¹⁸ explains that the body organizes and gives structure to the phenomenal field at the same time as the world recedes beyond and transcends our body’s immediate grasp of it. Perception, then, is a constant organizing and reorganizing encounter. At the heart of perception is the capacity to discern an organization guided by the anticipation of the whole; the lived conjunction of body-world in an ever organizing/reorganizing movement. Simultaneously, then, aesthetic play is means and consequence, process and product,

rather than alternating or distinct entities. One's body becomes the place, the determining ground where this conjuncture is exemplified. Merleau-Ponty¹⁹ describes such a place as a sensible thing—holding together of itself, cohering into things, embodying within it a unity of sense.

Aesthetic Play: A Mediating Ground for the Conjuncture of Theory / Practice Relations

I came to see teachers' and students' aesthetic play, embracing perception and expression, as a mediating ground for living the conjuncture of theory/practice in classrooms. Such a mediating ground does not prescribe proper responses but instead asks teachers and students to attend to understanding what the encounter says. Theory is thus understood as occurring within situations, arising out of the purposes and particularities encountered. It comes to constitute a practice understood as a way of being and working. As these practices are not standard but aim for attunement within situations, theory and practice are always in the making. It seems the mediating ground comprises, as Merleau-Ponty²⁰ identifies, a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence refers to the inherent pervading qualities of encounters. Common pervading qualities persist of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogue, inquiry guided, projection, and self-consciousness, through aesthetic play. Thus aesthetic play requires that participants live in situations and are engrossed in ensuing learning relationships. Aesthetic play also assumes that learning be a search that acknowledges complexity and comprehensiveness. These requirements comprise the immanent raw materials. Dewey²¹ speaks of art materials undergoing change towards the formation of a work of art. Similarly, raw materials or qualities progressively reform and shape aesthetic play. Eisner²² explains that "experience is what we achieve as those qualities come to be known. It is through qualitative inquiry, the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world, that we make sense."

Merleau-Ponty's²³ transcendence refers to that which moves in the movement of aesthetic play, arising out of immanence. Thus, the agentic possibilities are suggested through perceiving the qualitative world. Dewey²⁴ insists that perception is about seeing through possibilities, not constraints. Aesthetic play reveals possibilities suggesting implications for teaching/learning situations. These implications for teachers, students, curriculum, and context can be characterized as uncharted ground. The uncharted ground of aesthetic play centers on building relationships between teachers, students, curriculum, and context. Educating takes form through the confluence of particular relationships that are encountered. The mediation becomes the design for learning in an ever emerging, changing form. The continual creation of aesthetic

space for teaching and learning mediates between perception/action, process/product, student/teacher, theory/practice, and subjectivity/objectivity, and fleshes out the fragile nature of this uncharted ground. These interactive relationships are, as May²⁵ explains, “both perceptive and receptive, just as form and substance are inseparable in art.” Balance is always fragile. Uncharted ground requires fragile exploration in order to make one’s way as a student and teacher. Discernment of the mean²⁶ is required. Aristotle terms such discernment *phronesis*, a practical wisdom. *Phronesis* surfaces through teachers’ and students’ words, actions, and feelings. This is not a generalizable imposed wisdom, but specific to a moment, unanticipated. Aesthetic play is a medium. The interplay or mediation discloses perceptual understandings and practical wisdom living within the movement. Thus, aesthetic play asks all participants to live their lives in classrooms with greater sensitivity to education as a medium. Dewey²⁷ identifies “sensitivity to a medium as a medium as the very heart of all artistic creation and aesthetic perception.” He notes that sensitivity to the intimacy of relations that hold parts together is characteristic of artistic design. “Only when the constituent parts of a whole have the unique end of contributing to the consummation of a conscious experience, do design and shape lose superimposed character and become form.”²⁸ These capacities to perceive relationships amongst parts seem akin to aesthetic play struggled for by teachers and students. The ability to participate in teaching/learning situation as artists engaged in aesthetic play seems dependent on developing this capacity.

Aesthetic play engages participants in making sense of the world through involvement with it. Crowther²⁹ calls this “ontological reciprocity, the dynamic action of embodied subject and phenomenal world upon one another.” It engages participants in a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification dependent always on the given circumstances involved. Thus, aesthetic play is specifically situated and historically conditioned demanding engagement with particularities. It is an ongoing search for attunement that calls attention to process; how one is being created and creative. In even the simplest occurrence, sensory, affective, contextual, and historical facets figure into an inseparable unity. One’s body-hold upon the world is of enormous complexity. As Merleau-Ponty³⁰ states:

The life of consciousness—the life of desire or perpetual life—is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects around us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects.

Thus, the sensibilities are the sources of our consciousness. Simultaneously, perception is exploration via the senses requiring

sustained attention to the qualities in situations. Perception is interpretive because meanings and values are brought to perception by prior contact with the world. The thinking involved is an existential process—the interaction and exchange of self with the infinite complexities of the situation. Dialogue and participation is key to meaning making. The meaning made is neither subjective nor objective but the integral relation of both. This requires attention to the relations between qualities. Such qualitative thought requires the willing immersion of self in the situation, a situation that is cognizable by the senses. As Eisner³¹ (1985) emphasizes:

The eye is a part of the mind and the ability to read the qualitative world in which we live is the major avenue through which those forms we call thoughts are constructed. All thinking requires content and that content emanates from our contact with the world. It is our sensory system that first provides the material we experience, reflect upon, and eventually manipulate.

In other words, content means little without contact. Purpose is something to be worked toward, rather than something necessarily present at the beginning of the creating process. Participants play with concrete realities and relations. Expression involves searching for qualities that show how experience is lived, felt, and understood by participants. Aesthetic play demands such participatory thinking, thus, contact with subject matter is deliberately sought. Participating students talked of learning significances being retained and greater belongingness to their thinking, as evidenced in care and concern for their work and the work of others. I noted a pride and growing sense of self as a thinker emerging in participating students. Seemingly, the power of aesthetic play is manifested through being inseparably bound up with the question of what it means to be human, insisting that within the making, creating act, participants dare look at the sense and selves being made on a continual basis.

Aesthetic Play: A Dialogue of Faith

Aesthetic play requires all participants to remain faithful to the intricacies and intensities of human experience. Teachers and students continually improvised within relations, adapting, building, and changing meaning. The indeterminate nature of aesthetic play assumes teaching/learning is complex and individual. All oriented toward sensitivity to the many relations present in teaching/learning situations deliberately seek out fragility's presence, in order to honor the existing complexity and individuality. Eisner³² explains, "What is mediated through thought are qualities, what is managed in process are qualities, and what terminates at the end is a qualitative whole. . . ." Discerning between these

qualitative relationships entails a dialogue of faith. This qualitative interdependence centers on faith acting as a catalyst. This is faith understood as being in touch with context, finding accordance with lived experience. Such accordance with lived experience takes the form of continuous dialogues between self and other. These dialogues of faith ask participants to venture into the unknown with an audacity and tentativeness. Audacity refers to placing value on entering into such dialogues of faith. Belief takes up purpose as something to be worked toward, rather than something that is necessarily present from the beginning. Tentativeness refers to the exposed, uncertain nature such participation demands. Commitment is required, grappling and questioning in the pursuit of meaning. The negotiation between audacity and tentativeness embraces these contraries as interactive and interconnected relationships. In this way, dialogues move back and forth, way-making in a constant exchange between self and situation. Jardine³³ (1992) claims that the task of inquiry so conceived "is not to dispel this tension, but to live and speak from within it." Harboring within aesthetic play is an integral fragility with particular assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching and learning. These assumptions, values, and beliefs center on teaching as a call to respond to needs, desires, and interests of children³⁴ (Hansen, 1995). Faithfully responding to this call necessitates centering/embracing fragility as a productive power alive within the act of creating.

Notes

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