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In Search of Aesthetic Space: Delaying Intentionality in Teaching/Learning Situations

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ABSTRACT: Aesthetic considerations are qualitative, personal, and value laden and do not fit well into existing educational frameworks. Yet, I think greater aesthetic awareness is a pragmatic and philosophical necessity missing in much schooling. An aesthetic context calls for a rethinking and revaluing of what is educationally important. This paper explores such possibilities along with the concrete implications of taking aesthetic considerations seriously, within a school setting. Opened in September, 1997, the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, Calgary Board of Education, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has chosen to value the creating process, primary to the arts, within the school curriculum as a whole. It seems an ideal situation in which to pursue connections between curriculum theory, practice, and the aesthetic.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic education, aesthetic play, aesthetic space, embodiment, hermeneutics, intentionality/unintentionality in teaching and learning, phenomenology, reciprocity.

As a teacher and parent I feel educational reforms of the last two decades have focussed on objectifying specific learning outcomes resulting in much superficial rather than substantial learning. With emphasis upon what may be superficial behaviors, little attention is given to assimilation, internalization, or integration of thoughts. Britzman's (1991) discussion of the structure of teaching experience that compartmentalizes knowledge, separating pedagogy from content, knowledge from interests, theory from practice, and Garrison's (1995) view of the necessity of style in teaching, both point to the pivotal place that the aesthetic should hold in teaching and learning situations. Dewey (1934) states that aesthetic experience is "experience in its integrity... experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its

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development as experience" (p. 274). This is precisely the dilemma Britzman portrays of the fragmentation of experience and how that plays out in praxis. Garrison's concern with the dominant technocratic discourse and its devastation of style reiterates this. I conclude that greater aesthetic awareness is a pragmatic and philosophical necessity missing in much schooling. But, as Garrison and Britzman allude, the existing educational structures do not support or encourage this.

Clark (1995) notes that aesthetic awareness places value on intuitive responses, divergent solutions, non-linear learning, experimentation, observation, peer interactions, and learning processes, shifting more responsibility to students through the development of non-directive teaching skills. These aesthetic considerations are qualitative, personal, and value laden and do not fit well into existing educational frameworks. An aesthetic context calls for a rethinking and revaluing of what is educationally important. Perhaps, as Greene (1991) states "it will also disclose the unexpected. Education will be viewed as if, after all, it can be otherwise" (p. xi). I am exploring such possibilities along with the concrete implications of taking aesthetic considerations seriously, within a school setting. Opened in September, 1997, The Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, Calgary Board of Education, has chosen to value the creating process, primary to the arts, within the school curriculum as a whole. The people involved obviously see a significance in the *aesthetic* for all learning. Thus, it seems an ideal situation in which to pursue connections between curriculum theory, practice, and the *aesthetic*. I am working with three teachers (Diane, Lorraine, Laurie) that have volunteered to let me be a part of their classrooms and explore their efforts to create an aesthetic space for their students to learn in. This vignette is a tentative interpretation of their practice. I offer it as a starting place to further discussion.

A style that permeates all three classrooms is aesthetic play. By aesthetic play I refer to an awareness of the creating process that I see informing Diane's, Lorraine's, and Laurie's teaching practices. I observe delaying intentionality to be central within aesthetic play. It is a sensitivity to the many nuances and possibilities present and a willingness to play along with them. Though neither Diane, Lorraine, or Laurie use the words 'delaying intentionality in learning, each has an intimate understanding of its very important place within their teaching practices. In fact, as I mention it to them as a theoretical notion, they respond with some disbelief that this is indeed a revelation.

They are so intuitively and practically familiar with it that to acknowledge its place and role seems odd. At the same time, I have observed this aim to be a struggle to live out in their classrooms on a daily basis. They keep at it because each knows that the learning feels so much more substantial in this way. Teaching should be a very intentional activity, but delaying intentionality creates space for greater possibilities. I try to recreate this tension, played out in Diane's, Lorraine's, and Laurie's teaching practices, throughout this vignette. I observed these tensions to be grappled with by Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie rather than dreaded or endured. This reflects a spirit I admire.

Intentional/Unintentional Play

How do teachers create, maintain, and nurture aesthetic space that delays intentionality? As a starting place I turn to the word *intentional* itself. Every word has a texturedness, layers of meaning that unearthed can be very revealing. The meaning a term holds comes to be through interplay between the history of its interpretations and the interpretive anticipations brought to encounters with it. This is at the heart of Gadamer's (1960/1994) thesis about "effective - historical consciousness" (p. 165). To see what intention has to reveal, I personify a dialogue between *intentional* and *unintentional*. Kant (1790/1952) claims play fictions create knowledge. This knowledge is discovered within the play of appearances. A personificatory fiction follows:

Intentional

There is a purposefulness inherent in me. I see exactly where I am taking this dialogue. My mind is fixed on this view as I design the path toward this goal. I sequence steps or activities that will achieve the desired ideal. And though I know that the late 17th century notion of the ideal is not attainable, I believe it is my job to fix and restore the ideal as closely as possible. It serves as an unalterable guide to my actions. This is a structured, disciplined approach I take and one that is always open to public scrutiny. My linear nature makes me accessible for all to make sense of and to know exactly the final outcome.

Unintentional

I am characterized by being much more playful in nature. I dance along (seemingly) aimlessly at the mercy of fortuitous events. I do not see a preconceived end, nor do I have a plan. I exist in a realm of solitude,

beholden to no one or thing but myself. Immediate impressions engulf and preoccupy me. It is a phenomenological and existential experience. I let events put me in place as I sometimes put them in place. Structure emerges in the dance between. It is like finding a rhythm we can share. There is a knowing in this face to face meeting with immediacy that is very personal, subjective, and emotional* I evolve, through various associations, as I live them.

Intentional

I abhor such a careless attitude. Pre-meditation is deliberate on my part as I design with absolute certainty my behaviour. I may choose to incorporate a design strategy or model proven to illicit intentional behaviour in goal-directed activities. Certain inputs guarantee specific outputs. I must be answerable in terms of responsibility and ethical considerations. It is my duty to achieve the established aims.

Unintentional

But, I suggest that such willful, premeditated determination excludes the accidental and inadvertent occurrences. You are so focused on an external reference that you negate the contextual milieu that surrounds you. I argue that this negligence is irresponsible and could raise ethical dilemmas. You make decisions like a god looking down from above, rather than discover working from within.

Intentional

Nonsense! I have seriously studied my plan. It meets a specified future based on my assessment of the present. I proceed on course, stressing that participation is entirely voluntary.

Unintentional

I have no doubt that your way is paved with good intentions but I believe your anticipated outcome over-determines your planned activities. In proposing such a strategy, intentional behaviour follows a prescribed formula oblivious to immediacy, change, and chance. Such intensity is a selfish interest; intent upon privilege for itself There is a singleness of predetermined purpose that stresses intended effect, subordinating and/or contrasting with notions of means. There is no zoom for possibilities from your perspective.

Intentional

My means are carefully ordered and calculated in advance. I would substitute such certainty and control for haphazard, unplanned, and unintegrated development at any time.

Unintentional

The concept of development implies movement. Whether this is random or specified results in a direction of some kind. We share this in common* All thinking and perceiving is always oriented. What orients it is the difference. Consider for a few moments the possibility that your orchestrated result began as a conception generalized from first intuition or apprehension. After all, intent the root word we share, refers to attention. I suggest that this attention is drawn firstly through the senses. Pro-conceptions and theoretical notions are obstructions to this.

As determined as you are to be intentional I determine to be unintentional. My attention lives for the moment, absorbing heedlessly and reacting spontaneously. Within our root word intent is derived from the Latin, meaning toward. I am cognizant of self towards that which is other than it. I live my life with greater sensitivity.

Intentional

What you are describing is reckless and thoughtless. Your intent is far more selfish than mine. You are "blinded by self (Murdoch, 1967, p. 32). Within our root word intent is the Latin *tendere* (tend) meaning stretch. My attention stretches forward and beyond towards the overriding ideal of "the sovereignty of the good" (p. 22).

Unintentional

Perhaps reckless is correct. There is definitely an abandonment to come what may. I allow desire or feeling to erupt. It is not enough to learn the skill and technique of inquiry to develop such feeling. To be able, does not necessarily equate with being willing. I have learnt to connect means and "ends-in-view" (Dewey, 1934). It is a question not only of identifying the task, but of identifying with it I do disagree with being characterized as thoughtless. I am deliberate, pushed and pulled by uncertainties.

Intentional

But, a certain end is what I desire and seek. I am fully resolved on a predetermined and fixed purpose.

Unintentional

This assumes an imposed meaning, though. It is not that I see myself without purpose entirely. Kant (1790/1962) speaks of purposiveness without a purpose (p. 43). This captures my nature. Perhaps the prefix 'un' rather than being interpreted as 'anti' could be interpreted in the old English form to bring out of To bring out of intention could encompass both poles of our dialogue. The middle ground provides a space for contemplation. Through observation and given time to dwell with and in situations contemplation is a willingness to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations of self and other on an ongoing basis. The middle ground provides a space to experience freedom. Suspension of rules or formulas makes possible the creation or invention of meaning, positing alternative possibilities. The middle ground provides a space for the imagination. A primary use of imagination is as mediator between ends and means. The estrangement of means and ends is a double estrangement: of means without dreams (drudgery) or of dreams without means (fantasy)" (Howard, 1991, p. 339). The middle ground creates a space for passion. Kant (1790/1962) calls such an event "delight" (p. 42). As I take ownership for the task it comes alive in thought, feeling, and action. A spirit of inquiry, delight, or passion, emerges of its own volition. This centers around discovery, with this neither being an object or a concept, but a feeling or mental state that is consuming. It is the liberation of intention from the confines of mere rote responses, categorization, routine, and hierarchical sequentially.

Intentional

So in creating such a space you are suggesting that I be willing to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations, abandon rules or formulas, and playfully enjoy the experience?

Unintentional

Yes. It means succumbing to the process. In so doing you give up exclusive control. Control becomes a shared venture. A co-presence develops of response and reaction (Noddings, 1984). It becomes an

ongoing search for attunement as I both seek and give myself to the creation (Heidegger, 1964).

Intentional

That would be a tremendous leap of faith for me.

Unintentional

I know it to be just that. The paradox is that if one could see what would count as such a leap of faith in a particular situation, then the leap would have already been made. Willing suspension of disbelief is necessary. What this creates space for, though, is speculation and conjecturing about possibilities that otherwise would not have been considered.

Intentional

Then you consider the end result to be better?

Unintentional

I know the process to feel more substantial reaching momentary conclusions that then act as catalyst, furthering the process. "A conclusion is no separate and independent thing; it is the consummation of a moment" (Dewey, 1934, p. 38). This is continual. I do not locate ends in one place. I emerge with a greater sense of self progressively articulated and unified through concrete interactions with that which is ostensibly other than it (Hegel, 1807/1977).

Intentional

Therefore, the results of thought are actively shaped and determined by the process of thought itself. Thought not only shapes outcomes, it is constitutive of them.

Unintentional

More than that, the forms of thought might be altered by what emerges in the creating process. This transactive, mutually transformative interdependence is critical.

Intentional

If indeed we've achieved consensus on this, then, for all intents and purposes this dialogue can come to an end.

Unintentional

How about, in situated events and all senses a resolution is in the making or in T. S. Eliot's words:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot, cited in Ross, 1985, p. 179).

In acknowledging that such dialogue is forever context bound, I believe it holds "within its limits" the possibility for endless interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 343). Therefore, the potential whole of meaning of any conversation or text can never be fully revealed because everyone generates additional interpretations. I desired for you to participate in the to and *fro* movement, to be taken in by its play. To synthesize the dialogue created, means without ends is empty; ends without means is blind. Dewey (1934) talks of the artist assuming the attitude of the perceiver while involved in the making process. Only as ends and means are taken in, made part of one's response, can they form a continuum. This supersedes the distinctions between subjective and objective, theory and practice, mind and body, rational and irrational, change and changelessness, that the dialogue raises, and calls you to enter into the larger whole of the play - to consider delaying intentionality as liberating and pregnant with possibilities.

Creating Aesthetic Space in Classrooms

Variations on the intentional/unintentional dialogue play out in Diane, Lorraine and Laurie's teaching practices daily as they search for aesthetic space. Aesthetic space values individual interpretation, with dialogue and participation as a means to sense making which is inquiry guided. Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie see their practices as such works of art in progress. They seek emergent ends rather than predefined, measurable outcomes. In this sense, the ends are found, not necessarily neatly attained. They surface through interaction with students. Kandinsky (1947) captures the spirit I am after in saying "painting is

a vast, thunderous dash of many worlds, destined through a mighty struggle, to erupt into a totally new world which is creation" (p. 16). This dynamic interaction characterizes their teaching practices. They do not allow their teaching practices to be dominated by routine, habit, or formulas. A large part of this interaction is their intentional delay of intentionality in learning; intentionally creating space where unintentional learning can take place.

For example, Diane has students involved in assuming roles in a fictional community setting. In her mind she sees each student developing their fictional character, fleshing out individually and as a group, how they will live. Diane sees the many directions they can take. She sees the issues and concerns this should raise. The "felt difficulty" (Dewey, 1910, p. 72) she is experiencing, she desires for her students. To initiate this within her students she must get them to take a leap of faith with her from being on the outside to being on the inside. Emotional commitment is needed. Diane really works hard at providing experiences for her students that thicken the plot for them. Diane knows that her students must allow themselves to be immersed in immediacy and be attentive to this immediacy for this to happen. One glimpse of this is the consideration of trees and forests within the fictional community. Students are asked to sketch a spruce, birch, poplar, and pine tree in each of the four seasons. They are to be attentive to the quality of the species and its individual characteristics. One student describes her spruce tree as being "four times as high as it is wide, pyramidal in shape, with branches growing straight out from the trunk. Its expression is dark and serious." Another student describes a birch tree as having "a sturdy trunk, a few relatively short branches, and a whole pile of long branches that arch and droop toward the ground." He describes it as "cubic" in shape though not "dense, feeling more light and graceful" Students must consider the medium that will be most suitable to describe the trees - the delicate line of a lead pencil, the fluidity of pen and ink, the textural quality of charcoal and contour, or the precision of felt tip. So, students have begun to acquire many ideas and insights about trees through this exercise. This is enhanced further by researching terms associated with these trees and environmental issues and concerns. Students are then asked to invent a tree that would be useful in their fictional community setting. The creation is to be based on the trees studied and the needs of their community. The designs are translated into 3D models and placed in

the community setting's experimental farm accompanied by documented considerations for further study.

The emotional commitment to learning that Diane desires to facilitate within her students reflects her understanding of teaching as sharing with her students who she is as a person. Diane tells me that teaching is about spirituality saying "I see everything as connected. I am very sensitive to all relations. I want each student to feel themselves to be a learner with valid insights" (transcripts, January 24, 1998, p. 5). Diane makes a concerted effort to create a learning space in which every student's spirit is fed and thrives.

Lorraine plans activities deliberately to provide students with a wider familiarity with concepts, exposing them to ways of thinking and working that are new. She feels such exposure and exploration expands the possibilities students draw on and through. Lorraine sees her role in this as crucial. She comments:

If I let learning take diverse directions without making a deliberate effort to facilitate connections, it would be in Dewey's words *mis-educative*. Rather it demands that I be that much more knowledgeable, more in tune with students; lots of digging, (transcripts, January 15, 1998, p. 1)

Characterization in a novel study takes on a fleshed out fullness in Lorraine's classroom. Students look beyond the words and mental images the storyline creates. Lorraine has a student assume a main character's persona. As a class they decide how she should position her body, appropriate mannerisms, the clothes she should wear, her facial expression, in order to mold her into the character from the novel. The student models the character in the middle of the room. Lorraine then asks students to silently study the character they have created. What does the body convey? They are then asked to translate these feelings into gesture drawings that capture the impressions of the character. These are very fast line drawings that denote action and feeling. Within these one to two minute drawing times the room falls silent. I can feel students absorbed in translating their feelings to paper. Lorraine talks about the line qualities selected and why. Students acquire descriptive words, and attentiveness and sensitivity to images that words suggest, and vice-versa. This exercise, fleshing out characterization, is not a diversion in Lorraine's practice. It is one of many activities on characterization that Lorraine guides her students through. Students gain a greater sense of the development of characterization through many layers. Lorraine hopes that students

really experience "the fun in finding the connecting threads to their work and their lives in a supportive, nurturative space that values difference and provides strength for each person to develop as a unique individual" (transcripts, January 15, 1998, p. 4).

Laurie desires her students to be curious. She speaks of "wanting to instill a desire to learn in students. I am really always trying to figure out ways" (transcripts, February 10, 1998, p. 9). When the Civic Art Collection came to the Creative Arts Centre, Laurie delayed visiting the collection with her class. Students were first provided with a list of the titles of the works* Laurie had students close their eyes and picture each piece in their minds. They pictured colors, shapes, lines, and textures. They thought about what might be happening in the art form. Did they hear sounds, sense movement, or smell aromas? Students then drew detailed sketches of these pictures conjured in their minds. Laurie participates fully in this process. She insists "on consciously modelling this attitude towards learning for her students. I am serious, enthusiastic, open to possibilities, and wearing a smile" (transcripts, February 10, 1998, p. 9). When students visited the collection they were very attentive to similarities and differences of interpretations. Students were asked to compile questions that each piece elicited for them. Laurie asserts that "one thing I know is that time is an enormous factor. I am often surprised by where student teaming can go if I give them the time and properly facilitate the learning" (transcripts, February 10, 1998, p. 9). In this way they were not asked to rush to conclusions as to why an artist chose a particular medium, technique, color, shape, and so on, but rather, were given the opportunity to play with why. These questions became the basis for further exploration that took many other forms.

Sustaining and enhancing this link between the student and the phenomenological world is the role of Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie. I am struck by the possibilities of this delay of intentionality through aesthetic play for all teaching and learning situations. Gadamer's (1960/1989) view of play as a pattern or structure continually reconstituted by those who play along with it (pp. 101 -106) parallels my experiences of patterning in the classrooms of Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie. These are spaces infused and unified by pattern. The patterns appear, disappear, and reappear. I continually rediscover patterns in each classroom. Within each pattern different interactive relationships are explored. But, all arise from perceptions of the relation between parts and whole. These patterns are signs of dynamic activity at work.

Dewey (1934) talks of common patterns within his notion of *experience*, commenting that there are conditions to be met without which experience can not come to be (p. 43). Through being attentive to the various relations of parts to whole within these patterns I am aware of recursive themes infused within fluctuating patterns. It is the confluence of these themes as interactive relationships that form and reform the patterns; always in the making. Perhaps they form the needed space (Dewey's 8 conditions) for aesthetic play.

I have struggled with how best to convey these themes. I fear the written outcome appears more fixed and linear than is my intent. Please keep in mind that the relational, mutually transactional nature of these themes is in no way linear. I desire for you to feel immersed in the themes as mediums; agencies of transmission and transformation. Please do not assume this collection is exhaustive. Ask yourself what is missing, what might I add?

Recursive themes within a space to play:

Attentiveness: Through close observation and given time to dwell with and in situations, attentiveness is a willingness to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations.

The Personal: Historicity and context of self intercepts with all sense making. Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience. There are multiple ways in which the world can be known.

Emotional: Aesthetic play is discovery. The discovery is neither an object or a concept, but rather a feeling or mental state that is consuming (pleasurable, overwhelming, exciting, etc.).

Felt Freedom: Aesthetic play needs space and freedom. Suspension of rules or formulas makes possible the creation or invention of meaning. *Discursive:* Felt freedom constructs a pattern of thought. Dialogue with self and others is crucial. The discourse entered into becomes the link to sense making. It suggests an organization for the play process to take.

Inquiry Guided: The organization emerges from the play itself. It is always in the making. As such it requires openness to possibilities, attentive listening, and responding. It is a dialogue of faith: a search process that is inquiry guided. The process determines the form or manner of representation as it evolves. This form is fluid; ever changing. *Projective:* Play leads one to be able to posit alternative possibilities. Without a playful approach to thinking it would seem that imaginative

thought, requiring speculation and conjecturing about possibilities, may not be possible.

Self-Identity: Aesthetic play fosters self-consciousness. Relations between self and other are continually addressed.

Morality: No matter how much aesthetic play enhances identity it can not proceed independently of (or as substitute for) moral judgement. Play can go wrong.

Fragility: As aesthetic play pulls one forward into the unknown, uncertainty is necessarily present, acting as a catalyst. The fragility that emerges is a constant. Diffusion and fragmentation are tensions in the process of playing with parts, to whole, to parts. Attaining a balance is an arduous process that can contradict one's beliefs and what one takes for granted.

These recursive themes form a "determining ground" (Kant, 1790/1962, p. 71) that creates space to play with ideas, search for connections, and see possibilities for students and teachers. Teachers and students need to become players in this aesthetic space with these recursive themes folding, unfolding, and feeding back into each other and themselves, hence delaying intentionality. This assumes that teaching is not a technical activity, but rather, a complex meeting space of the personal and relational, demanding sensitivity to "children's realities and lifeworlds" (Van Manen, 1992, p. 439), watchfulness and thoughtfulness (Aoki, 1992, p. 25), caring, the construction of knowledge, and constant practical activity in concrete situations and relations. Intentionality in learning is more ambiguous, uncertain, and complex; delayed intentionality results.

The search for aesthetic space in teaching and learning situations is a worthwhile struggle from the point of view of Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie. This space takes many shapes as these glimpses into their teaching practice illustrate. What is very dear to me is the centrality and importance of the place that Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie have within this process. They play multiple roles balancing between facilitator and participant. Their teaching practices are a complex, mediating process of interactive relationships such as seeing/acting, student/teacher, theory/practice, subjective/objective. It is an ongoing search for attunement that requires awareness of the many interactive relationships that meet in situations. They walk this tightrope, relying on a felt sense, responding and reacting accordingly. Achieving such balance is always precarious. But, awareness of this fragility is its

strength. It asks Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie to live their lives in the classroom with greater sensitivity. They hope that, in turn, students will do so too.

Delaying intentionality in teaching and learning situations asks Diane, Lorraine, and Laurie to embrace their teaching practices at once as open and determinant, finitely contextualized and infinitely potential. Means and ends were never opposing. "They are intertwined and interactive, in dialectical intention and reflexive play, both perceptive and receptive, just as form and substance are inseparable in art" (May, 1993, p. 216). Delaying intentionality in teaching/learning situations of all kinds creates space for inventiveness and ingenuity -worthwhile pursuits, I imagine.

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