

Aesthetics, learning and education – a reflection

Ann-Mari Edström

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7171-4164>

ann-mari.edstrom@mau.se

Welcome to *EDUCARE's* special issue *Aesthetics, learning and education*, part one (of two). This is the place where the guest editor introduces the reader to the field of research that the special issue addresses. Only, I see one catch, or actually a couple of catches, which make this task an impossible one.

The first catch is that there is really no easily delimited field of research. Instead, research on aesthetics, learning and education relates to a variety of research fields. Learning processes come in varying shapes and in all kinds of contexts. Artistic and aesthetic processes and practices can most definitely be seen as unique forms of knowledge, just as other contexts have forms of knowledge that are unique to them. However, teaching and learning is always about something and, unless you teach or study aesthetics as an academic subject, the aesthetic aspects will thus also be a part of this 'something'. In this first part of the special issue, for example, this 'something' consists of creative writing, cooking, voice as a musical instrument, chemistry and drama. To try to squeeze these into one general and more easily manageable aesthetic unity will mean running the risk of seriously reducing qualities and characteristics (aesthetic or other) of these different 'somethings'. If anything, this variety and multitude of meaning and application can be seen as a characteristic of a research field that resists delimitation.

The second catch concerns how to define aesthetics in a learning and education context. At least in Sweden, we seem to have a rather complicated relationship to aesthetics as a concept, and to its many possible meanings illuminated in the curricula and various educational contexts (e.g. Lindgren, 2006; Lindgren & Ericsson, 2013; Thorgersen, 2007). Partly as an attempt to handle this multitude of meanings and applications, we tend to group aesthetic aspects of learning and aesthetic subjects such as music, drama, visual arts etc. into one aesthetic unity based on their supposed similarities.

To group, classify and compare different art forms is a relatively new invention, dating back to the eighteenth century. However, as Kristeller (1951/1996) points out, those categorizations were made from the vantage point of the reader, listener or viewer rather than the producer.

In many ways, Kristeller's analysis is still valid today. The conceptions of aesthetic aspects of learning and education as a simplified homogeneity or as a complex heterogeneity can be related to the vantage point of the consumer or producer. These two vantage points, however, do not necessarily correspond with one's actual position in the field. Both perspectives may be adopted by practitioners as well as consumers (intentionally or unintentionally) depending on personal or political aims and needs. In my view, the homogeneous approach is too simplistic for the same reasons stated above; squeezing the qualities of varying aesthetic aspects into one more manageable unity is an act of reduction. In today's times of over-simplification and rationalization, it is more important than ever to acknowledge variety as both a quality of and a condition for learning. As Biesta (2014) notes, any kind of education always come with an element of risk, simply because we are humans and thus unpredictable:

The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. Yes, we do educate because we want results and because we want our students to learn and achieve. But that does not mean that an educational technology, that is, a situation in which there is a perfect match between 'input' and 'output', is either possible or desirable. And the reason for this lies in the simple fact that if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether. (Biesta, 2014, p. 1)

All areas that to their nature are open for a variety of meaning and/or are closely related to a practice, also run a risk of being 'invaded' by questionable research (as Rolf, 2001, puts it). Carlgren (2015) touches upon this as well, referring to theoretical knowledge taking over practical forms of knowledge in school as 'epistemic colonization'. Yet another example of a critique of rationalization invading education as well as today's society as a whole, is Bornemark (2018). I see empirical research from a producer's point of view as a particularly powerful way actively participate in this debate and thus balance it. Approaching aesthetic aspects of education and learning as a researcher means acknowledging the producer, and with this comes the possibility to explore and bring a variety of meanings to the fore as a quality and a resource rather than a problem (Edström, 2006).

Moreover, as this special issue confirms, there is much empirical research going on. Our call for abstracts focused on research-based contributions related to aesthetic aspects of education and learning,

including a variety of topics such as arts-based inquiries, aesthetics, poetry, literary and narrative studies to name a few. We received 23 abstracts, which was far more than we expected. As the peer review process proceeded, it became clear that we would have articles for two parts of this special issue. The second part of this special issue is planned for the autumn. This first part of *EDUCARE*'s special issue presents four articles. They illuminate formal and informal educational settings, and different groups of learners: from six-year old children to adults.

In his article "A multicultural community of practice", Chrysogonus Siddha Malilang explores a sparsely researched form of artist apprenticeship in Javanese culture called *nyantrik*. The article aims to describe the dialogic learning process of becoming a creative writer through immersion into an online multicultural community of practice, *Project 366*. A/r/tography is used as a methodological approach. This traditional form of apprenticeship of *nyantrik* extends geographical and sociocultural boundaries by using a digital communication platform. The article describes how the dialogue between master and apprentice is transformed from the more common hierarchical relationship into a horizontal, two-way communication by immersing in this multicultural *nyantrik* practice.

Authors Gita Berg, Helena Elmståhl, Ylva Mattson Sydner and Eva Lundqvist addresses another sparsely researched topic in the article "Aesthetic judgements and meaning-making during cooking in home and consumer studies". Focusing on aesthetic judgments in formalized cooking practices, the article aims to explore Swedish home and consumer studies (HCS) and students' meaning-making, thus adding a previously unexplored classroom practice to the accumulated research of aesthetic experiences and meaning-making. The study also explores the use of Practical Epistemology Analysis (PEA) in a new context of formalized cooking practices. The results indicate that aesthetic experiences, expressed as judgments in the study, among other things play a part in establishing power relations between the participant students and entail social and normative values.

Dramatization as a form of play-responsive teaching in early childhood education is the topic of the article "Dramatisering i spänningsfältet mellan 'som om' och 'som är' och sexåringars meningsskapande av kemiska begrepp och processer" by Annika Åkerblom and Niclas Pramling. They explore how a group of six-year-old children make sense of scientific knowledge during a workshop where the children engaged in dramatizing chemical concepts and

processes. The children were interviewed regarding their workshop experiences, and the interviews were analyzed with particular focus on how the children relate to fantasy (*as if*) and scientific knowledge (*as is*). The authors argue that how the children manage to distinguish, relate to and move between *as if* and *as is* when engaging with phenomena and processes, is central to dramatizing and, in a more general sense, also to play-responsive teaching.

In “Kropp, blick och plats – konstruktioner av dans- och vokalundervisning”, Carina Borgström Källén and Birgitta Sandström study educational contexts related to dance and music in which the voice is a central instrument. The authors endeavor a meta-analysis of the results from four previous studies in Sweden, including Upper Secondary School aesthetic programs and higher music education, focusing on the construction of these educational contexts from a gender perspective. With the concepts of *body*, *gaze* and *place* as the point of departure, the results indicate similar subject constructions across the different educational contexts; these constructions are based on traditions and conventions in the performing arts. The authors emphasize the need to acknowledge how *body*, *gaze* and *place* are constructed in teaching and learning to unveil norms and values embedded in the practice.

With this brief introduction, I invite you to read the full articles in this first part of the special issue. Together with the articles to be published in the second part this autumn, they represent the variety and richness of current research related to aesthetics, learning and education; they outline a lively, growing and promising area of research.

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