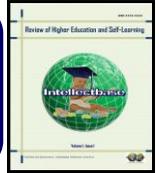




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TEACHERS AS ARTISTS: A READING OF JOHN DEWEY'S ART AS EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of the musings the author has on reading John Dewey's (1934) book, Art As Experience. According to Dewey, the history of human civilization is the history of the constant adjustment of a relationship between living beings and their environment. In their struggle to survive, the humans have either accommodated themselves to their environment or changed the environment in order to create the harmony and stability essential for their survival. This process follows a constant rhythm between tension/imbalance and harmony/balance. As old problems get solved, new problems emerge. In this process of tension and harmony, both humans and their environment have been transformed. This transformational process is replete with aesthetic experiences as tension/imbalance always leads to harmony/balance. According to Dewey, aesthetic experiences are 1) purposive, 2) imaginative, 3) transformative/reflective, and 4) intrinsically interactive between the living beings and their environments. This current paper sees teaching through these four lenses and tries to present a view about teaching as art, teachers as artists, and students as works of art. A list of suggestion for new teachers to experience aesthetic teaching is also attached.

Keywords: Education, Teaching, Esthetic Experience, Dewey.

INTRODUCTION

"I believe he (Mr. Holland, the music teacher in the movie) has achieved a success far beyond the richness and fame.... Look around you! There isn't a life that you have not touched! And each one of us is a better person because of you! We are your symphony, Mr. Holland! We are the melodies and notes of your Opus! We are the music of your life!"

A quote from the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus"

In *Art as experience*, Dewey (1934) argues that art includes not only the artistic objects in forms of buildings, books, paintings, statues, etc. but more importantly includes the human experiences that lead to their creation, including the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that human beings experience on a daily basis. Dewey illustrates this connection between the works of art, the refined and intensified forms of experience, and the everyday normal experiences of their creators by comparing them with "mountain peaks" and the "earth". He says, "Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are (*emphasis by the author*) the

earth in one of its manifest operations”(p. 3). Likewise, works of art do not exist in isolation from human's everyday experience. They are part and soul of the living beings daily life. In this paper, I hope to discuss Dewey's "art-as-experience" concept in the context of teaching as an aesthetic experience. As illustrated by the above quote from the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus", when teaching becomes art, teachers become artists and students and their learning become works of art thus produced. Before I start, I also hope to remind readers that my reading of Dewey is limited by my own living experiences, a Chinese female who grew up and lived a large part of her life in China before coming to the United States.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES: ART AS LIVING

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey challenges the western compartmental conception of art and claims that art is the aesthetic ordinary experience of human beings and that the "works of art" are the "enhancements" of that experience. To Dewey, "Every experience is the result of the interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives" (p.44). This interaction is characterized by the natural needs of humans for survival in their habitat, both physical and social. To survive, a living creature "must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest" (p.13). This process is full of tension, disorders, conflicts as well as order, balance and harmony, all of which interchange with each other and through which the living beings seek equilibrium and come to "a higher powered and more significant life" (p.14). For Dewey, the equilibrium and the higher powered and more significant life are the immediate goals, because "only when an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment does it secure the stability essential to living" (p.15). The ever-going process towards renewed equilibrium and harmony constitutes an aesthetic experience to a living being as he undergoes "the rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union" (p.15). To Dewey, "when the participation comes after a phase of disruption and conflict, it bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the aesthetic" (p.14).

In discussing happiness and delight, Dewey says, "they come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being -- one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence" (p.17). However, the "attainment of a period of equilibrium is at the same time the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle. The time of consummation is also one of the beginning anew" (p.17). Thus, happiness and delight result in the continuous struggles in life. As a result, we are escalated by the time of a felt harmony when union is achieved and we also face moments of resistance and tension positively. Like an artist embracing life's challenges and struggles, we "cultivate them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total" (p.15). As Dewey puts explicitly later in the book, "struggle and conflicts may be themselves enjoyed, although they are painful when they are experienced, as means of developing an experience" (p.41).

With this view of life/universe, Dewey comes to the conclusion that all human interactions with their environment, either in forms of shared harmony or struggle, constitute aesthetic experience, so long as they are leading to the never ending rhythm of losing and gaining the integration between the living being and his environment. In a sense, "esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the

ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization” (p.326). Works of art are the materialization of the consummations (including the unbalances and struggles proceeding them) which result from the integration of self and his environment; these works of art are inseparable from their creators’ normal experiences. Dewey makes this point well when he compares the works of art to be “mountain peaks” and the daily experiences to be “the supporting earth”.

TEACHING AS ART

Interestingly, reading *Art as Experience* reminds me of my own teaching experience. After graduation with a bachelor’s degree in English language and literature in China, I was assigned a job, much against my own will, to teach English as a foreign language at a special foreign language school that caters for students from grades two to twelve. However, I told myself that since teaching was to be my daily experience, I should try to make it an enjoyable experience for myself and for my students instead of a drudgery that I had to go through. With attainable goals, a genuine care for my students’ learning, and constant exploration to improve my teaching practice, I think I did succeed, to a certain extent, in making it an esthetic experience for myself. I remember when I was on the paid-maternity leave for six months after my daughter was born, I missed so much the interaction I had with my students in the classroom. Retrospectively, much of what I did kind of fell into Dewey’s description of what counts as aesthetic experience.

In this section, I hope to explore the teaching profession in light of Dewey’s concept of art as experience. I will try to discuss the kind of teachers who are artists and the kind of teaching that can be viewed as “aesthetic, beautiful, and true”, to use Dewey’s definition for art and aesthetic experience. Dewey has highlighted the following four characteristics that render any experience to be aesthetic.

First, aesthetic experiences are purposive. For Dewey, every integral experience has a beginning and moves towards a close, although the close/consummation is also part of a new integral experience. Life is “a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement” (p.35). Teaching profession emerged in the histories of the living beings “to adapt, accommodate and conquer” their living environments. Public educational institutions were established when human’s living environment changed and suddenly there was a need for a large number of youths to work for the fast developing industries. Grammar schools and common schools were set up to train the type of workers needed in large quantity and at faster speed. Thus, from the very beginning, educational institutions and teaching as a profession were created to achieve a better integration between the living beings and their environment.

However, in accordance with this, teaching, to be qualified as an aesthetic experience, needs to be explored and changed in both content and form according to the changes in the society. This has proved to be the case throughout the education history. We have witnessed changes made in terms of school structure, curriculum, instruction, and assessment at schools, which in turn affect teacher preparation with regard to the types of schools (normal schools versus general education), the number of years required for professional training, the kind of knowledge emphasized (pedagogical versus content), and the type of instruction based on our understanding of child development and psychology.

Secondly, aesthetic experiences are transformative. To Dewey, these experiences are the interaction between the “undergoing and doing”, between the environmental influences on the living beings and the actions taken by the living beings. Teaching, like all other experiences, is a transforming process in which the students, the learning environment, as well as the actor (teacher) him/herself. For transformation to take place, aesthetic teaching experiences should be cumulative and reflective. “Each of us assimilates into himself something of the values and meanings contained in past experiences” (p.71) and “we interrupt our yielding to the object to ask where it is leading and how it is leading there” (p.144). Being reflective is being critical. As a teacher, one needs to incessantly learn new things, evaluate one’s ways of teaching and the progress made in creating the works of art (students and their learning), and at the same time, adjust one’s own action appropriately. During this process, the teacher is constantly acting on and being acted upon by his environment, a phenomenon which Dewey calls the “reciprocity of undergoing and doing” (p.247). As a result, the teachers themselves are being transformed, “changed and developed through its (*their*) intercourse with things previously external to it (*them*)” (p.246), and teaching becomes a learning process for the teacher.

Thirdly, aesthetic experience is imaginative. According to Dewey, all conscious experience has some degree of imaginative quality and “the change in the climate of the imagination is the precursor of the changes that affect more than the details of life” (p.346). There is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions; the “conscious perception”, which is the imaginative phase of experience, is the solution to bridge the gap. Aesthetic teaching needs to be creative and risk taking. One can never learn to teach beautifully through imitation only.

Dewey also emphasizes the role of past experience. He views past experience as constituting meaning from which we grasp and understand the present experience. He argues, “A painter did not approach the scene with an empty mind, but with a background of experiences long ago funded into capacities and likes, or with a commotion due to more recent experiences” (p. 87). In addition to individual past experiences, Dewey also speaks highly of the collective experiences in forms of traditions and culture. Dewey believes that “acquaintance with masterpieces, and less than masterpieces” is a “touchstone” of sensitivity and that to be aware of a variety of traditions is a necessity in making critical judgments (p.311). There is no art in which there is only one tradition. Likewise, in teaching, there are many traditions. The successful stories of teaching are the “masterpieces of art”, and at the same time, each individual also has past successful experiences. However, individual and collective successful teaching stories should not be regarded as ‘the only best’ practices of teaching and be routinely and mechanically repeated thoughtlessly. On the contrary, they should be used in constructing future actions and goals with a touch of imagination and risk taking based on their students’ unique strengths, interests, and needs. When teaching is performed in this way, the experience becomes aesthetic, for it integrates past and present, individual and collective, experiences in projecting the future.

Finally, according to Dewey, aesthetic experiences are associated with “intrinsic operation”, in which “means and ends coalesce” (p.198). Dewey makes a distinction between the external and the intrinsic operations. By external operation, he means that the process of doing something is separated from the final goals. When a person studies in order to pass an examination or to get a

promotion, or when one travels to do a business transaction are examples of external operations. By intrinsic operation, Dewey means that the process of doing is the end in itself. For example, one learns for the sake of knowing and travels for the delight of moving and seeing what one encounters. Parallel in teaching, the one, who holds teaching as an external operation, may teach only for the purpose of getting a salary for a living; while the one who holds teaching as an intrinsic operation would love interacting with students and seeing the moment by moment intellectual and personal growth in children. To them, money is secondary. Only those who see the value of teaching in teaching itself will be able to enjoy a real aesthetic teaching experience!

To pave ways for intrinsic operation, Dewey also advocates for changes in social and economical relationships of living beings so that workers would have a sense of ownership of whatever they produce and in turn enjoy a more aesthetic experience in producing them. Dewey says,

“The values that lead to production and intelligent enjoyment of art have to be incorporated into the system of social relationships. ... What is true is that art itself is not secure under modern conditions until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work” (p.344).

In the field of education and teaching, this means that teachers should be treated with due respect as professionals and they should be entrusted with the power to play an active role in making the curricular and instructional decisions to achieve the teaching goals based on what they know about the students' strengths and needs. However, the current emphasis of “scientific and research based” instruction and the adoption of scripted programs have deskilled teachers from professionals to technicians, and consequently, robbed teachers of “the opportunity to be free” in contributing to their students' learning, which is essential to inducing aesthetic experience for the teachers.

CONCLUSION

According to Dewey the history of human civilization is the history of constant adjustment of the relationship between humans and their living environment, in which the living creatures and the world become integrated and, as a result of which, both are transformed. It is a history of human beings' struggles to accommodate themselves to and at the same to conquer their living environment in order to create the harmony and stability essential to their living. This process of integration and transformation constitute the aesthetic experiences, which are purposive, imaginative, transformative/reflective, and intrinsically interactive between the living beings and their environments. Teaching is NO exception. When a teacher engages in such interactions, he is experiencing an aesthetic process and he is producing works of art in their students.

Postscript

Studies have found that that as many as 50% of new teachers leave within the first 5 years of entry into the profession (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Ingersoll & Smith (2003) also found that about two-thirds of teachers left teaching after their first year either because they wanted to pursue another job or they were dissatisfied with teaching as a career or with their specific job. After reading and

discussing a brief section of Dewey's book, *Art As Experience*, I asked students in my Creative Expressions course to give the new teachers some suggestions so that they would experience some aesthetic teaching and stay in the teaching profession. The following is the list:

Suggestions for New Teachers to Experience Aesthetic Teaching

1. Connect what you teach in the classroom to "the real world" (bring in authors, take field trips, have guest speakers/readers).
2. Share your positive energy and enthusiasm for teaching. Children won't want to learn from teachers who don't want to teach.
3. Create opportunities for students to connect the content to their lives.
4. Encourage creativity, uniqueness and individualism.
5. Incorporate music, dance, drama, poetry and visual art.
6. Sense of humor.
7. Be organized and well prepared with clear purpose for every lesson.
8. Be flexible.
9. Make class interactive.
10. Always allow the students to respond and share thoughts and ideas that can help you to grow as a teacher.
11. Make use of wide range of resources.
12. Connect lessons to things you enjoy to share your enthusiasm with your students.
13. Demand respect from students.
14. Consistent discipline.
15. Let students' interests drive your teaching and classroom environment.
16. Keep the classroom environment open for creativity and safe to share ideas.
17. Respect the students.
18. Be aware of students' interests and abilities.
19. Laugh with students.
20. Laugh at yourself.
21. Be open-minded to learn from your students.
22. Take risk and try new teaching ideas.
23. REFLECT.

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