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## Learning From An Artistically Crafted Moment: Valuing Aesthetic Experience in the Student Teacher's Drama Education

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### Abstract

This paper takes the position that drama education falls within the field of aesthetic education, and involves learners in both creating and responding to the art of drama through a blending of thoughts, senses and emotions. The paper looks at aspects key to the experience of teaching and learning in drama within the aesthetic framework, and argues from a teacher educator stance that if prospective teachers develop an awareness of their own responses to experiences in the arts, they can be better prepared for noticing and crafting their own aesthetic teaching practice. It documents the author's own recalled aesthetic experience captured in poetic form, describes a later teaching episode which exhibits aesthetic and engaged features from a pre- service teacher education setting, and discusses the potential for learning from the transformation of aesthetic experiences.

***Remembering an Ophelia moment:***

at the last school they said  
she did Ophelia quite well really  
with no formal training-  
flitting round the gardens  
trailing hair and absent eyes and warbling  
in quivery strange voice — weird

*they didn't realise I wasn't pretending  
my head so screwed down by then  
snared by rules and demands.  
I knew frantic, and I knew*

*how easy  
just  
to  
drift  
under*

*In glimpses of whimsy floating freedom  
I discovered the mask.*

*(school works? 2005, Elizabeth Anderson)*

**Introduction**

The poem is used as an introduction because it records my own vividly remembered experience of engagement, and touches on matters that still beset my teacher self, namely how to engage students and how the two sided teaching/learning dynamic of drama can be crafted and passed on to teachers. Maxine Greene (2001) in one of her collected addresses to arts teachers, encourages them to reach back to find out how art experiences have made understandings possible in their own lives. Looking back, the poem for me captured both engagement and understanding, and matched what Cahnmann (2003) describes as the use of

poetry as a method of discovery – writing the poem I rediscovered the feeling of being in two worlds at once and the exhilaration of looking from one to the other. Reflecting on the experience from years later as Greene suggests, I recall being very alive and present, and conscious of being at once in the worlds of self, actor, and spectator. I remember the colours, the afternoon heat, the grass, and the quivery waveriness of my own voice, and a stab of pity for Ophelia; I remember weird looks from other students, and the sharp thrill of being different and free. Though in those days no-one went in for critical reflection, I am sure an assignment was set later, and can only hope that I wrote a better essay from an inside out memory.

At 17, as I drifted past the other students' unsure perturbed faces and circled the school flower gardens "chant[ing] snatches of old tunes" I realised sharply that this was a most unaccustomed, liberating and exhilarating experience. It is easy of course to put it down to a susceptible adolescent schoolgirl's fascination with the Shakespearean girl's plight for, but for me the insight into performance, the feeling of being at once oneself and someone else, and the moment of watching an audience who believed and disbelieved at the same time have remained lasting memories. Much later, I wrote the incident into poetry, and later again as teacher and drama educator, I have looked back and asked how the experience was so strongly imprinted, and how it might have shaped my present teacher awareness. The creative action and response of that moment typified an aesthetic learning experience, and, to use curriculum words, did "engage and connect thinking, imagination, senses, and feeling" (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p.20). Working in arts education is about opening ways for students and teachers to "express and interpret ideas within creative, [and] aesthetic... frameworks" (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p.20). As teacher and now teacher educator in the Arts and in drama education specifically, I look for ways to engage students in learning through senses, imagination and thinking; as researcher I am curious about how it happens, and as teacher educator I want to help teachers to find ways to make it happen themselves.

This paper takes the position that drama education falls within the field of aesthetic education, and involves learners in both creating and responding to the art of drama through a blending of thoughts, senses and emotions. The paper looks at aspects key to the experience of teaching and learning in drama within the aesthetic framework, and argues from a teacher educator stance that if prospective teachers develop an awareness of their own responses to experiences in the arts, they can be better prepared for noticing and crafting their own aesthetic teaching practice.

It is easy to look back on that fragment of memory and to recognise in it the presence of multisensory responses, engagement with an artistic form through first hand participation, and the weaving of thinking feeling and imagining processes, all of which are attributes of an

aesthetic learning experience. Educators, especially drama ones, will identify other themes, such as the notion of liminality for example, or the mask, but that is material for another discussion. For now, writing as a teacher educator, I select for examination several concepts which are constantly in mind for my practice. I have taken the remembered fragment as a way to look from inside and out at the notions of engagement, of provoked imagination, and of the awareness of one's own responses. This last seems to me an essential teacher skill, one which well crafted learning experiences in drama can help develop, so that in time, student teachers will be more perceptive teachers of their own students. The concepts fall within the wider field of aesthetic learning and aesthetic education – concepts which frame my discussion, but which also produce a bewildering variety of competing terms which need some deciphering.

### **Aesthetic learning and its place in education**

Views of aesthetic learning and its place in education have covered a range from developmental and experiential approaches to more theoretically infused interpretations. The use of the term is becoming more current – aesthetics, aesthetic experience, aesthetic engagement, aesthetic valuing and aesthetic knowing are all found in writings about the significance of the aesthetic in a broad education. The terms and approaches do need interpretation, and need to be demystified and made accessible.

The term “aesthetics” has had a net of complex complications around it, but is now making its place firm in our frameworks for education and schooling. It has had connotations of judgements guided by subjective opinion and feeling – Abbs (1994) pointed out that for a long time the term may have been disadvantaged by being bound up with the “aesthetes” and Pre Raphaelites, and Best (1992) commented wryly on its application to such phenomena as sunsets. For our purposes in education, and led by Dewey, Abbs and Best, the term has been set firmly and helpfully in a schooling context and we have come to know *aesthetic education as a basic mode of intelligence enhanced and developed through the symbolic forms of the arts*.

Dewey (1963), earlier than both Abbs and Best, had already confirmed his commitment to making the arts part of ordinary human experience, removing the arts from any pedestal, and finding ways for everyone to connect personal experiences to a wider life. In education, Dewey supported process – the doing of the art, the opening up of communication, the finding of something other than routine and familiar. He focused on an experience as aesthetic – any experience that was unified, meaningful, which held together and felt individual, and was attended by a heightened awareness. This last feature will appear again in later discussion about engagement in drama, but Dewey advocated using the aesthetic mode to teach every subject taught in education, not just the arts. For Abbs (1994), the aesthetics was a broader category than the arts. He defined the aesthetic as a mode of intelligence and response

working through the sensory experience, and traces aesthetic responses to the way a child learns to operate in the world. While aesthetics includes all sensory experiences, the arts operate through and depend upon the aesthetic mode. In Abbs' view, all artistic practice, including that which is part of the schooling process, is connected within the heritage of the aesthetic field, thus bringing about a convergence of the arts and aesthetics.

In recent decades, the arts have been established more authoritatively in national education curricula, and policy makers have taken a more determined and active attitude towards incorporating the arts as a learning area into education curriculum structures. In this process, claiming the language is an important first stage, both to authorize and advocate for the subject, and to establish and strengthen teacher acceptance and understanding. An arts language was already in use, because teaching and learning in the arts had always flourished, and terms used to describe the predominant ways of learning in the arts had been widely shared and accepted. Both the doing and the appreciating of artworks had been expressed in words such as *making*, *responding*, *appreciating*, *presenting*, *communicating*, *interpreting*, and from such terminology curriculum word-weavers selected and elaborated to suit their individual contexts. Initially the inclusion of "aesthetic" was possibly treated somewhat warily as yet another term that would need to be defined. Once established, the sphere of arts activity in education broadened rapidly, sparked by the vitality and energy of its users, students and teachers, and with new practices emerging, the language of the arts expanded. As arts education was written and talked about more over years, the notion of the aesthetic has once again become more prominent in the discourse. Dewey's ideas of finding the aesthetic in the everyday, and his vision for a broad education are reasserted in the encompassing and inclusive sense of "aesthetic" used by contemporary educationalists. Sinclair (2012), acknowledging Dewey, writes

Philosophers, educational psychologists and learning theorists, arts educators and practitioners have all identified the place of aesthetics, aesthetic engagement, or aesthetic knowing as significant, not just for learning about the arts, but as a powerful component of a broad education. (p. 44)

Increasing numbers of works have been written recently by practitioners and researchers documenting the practice and research directions that arts education is taking, drawing together the arts disciplines and their application in primary/elementary schooling. In a recent work, O'Toole states that "aesthetic" is a synonym for "artistic" (O'Toole, 2012a, p. 4), and defines the word's use for his purposes in his Australian context as extending

...across all artforms, to denote any formal shaping at any level of the resources of the body and other expressive media to create an ordered fusion of emotional, sensory and cognitive stimuli. (p. 4)

As the arts became more customary, wider ranges of processes and approaches for teaching and learning came into prominence. A particular influence was the more holistic understanding of the role of the child's earliest learning and development, and the recognition of how closely embodied learning is melded with the child's sensory and artistic experiences. O'Toole (2012b) argues convincingly and comprehensibly for this understanding of education in the arts in the contemporary context, weaving the legacy of childhood and the enduring importance of play against the backdrop of theatre, explaining the emergence of all these influences and clarifying them in pedagogical context. If we accept that the aesthetic is a mode of intelligence and if we accept that it is developed through art forms, and if we recognise too children's early play and art making as exploratory learning through senses, thoughts, bodies and emotions, then it is in the field of aesthetics that art and play come together most fittingly (and here we can include the storytelling, role-taking dramatic playing that is the source of drama).

Greene (2001) uses the term "aesthetic education." Her thinking draws on philosophy, art criticism and literature, taking more philosophical approach, yet the aesthetic experience and the life of the imagination are always essential in her view of education. Greene defines aesthetic education as

an intentional undertaking, designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend works of arts their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened. (Greene, 2001, p. 6)

For Greene, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving, and is about the making of new connections, openings, and unexpected possibilities. The (2001) collection "Variations on a Blue Guitar" compiles Maxine Greene's addresses from a series of annual symposia for teachers of the arts in which she repeatedly challenged her audience to find ways to develop in their students a more active sensibility and awareness, a more discriminating appreciation, a sense of breaking with the ordinary. Greene insists that teachers themselves need to experience the art forms from the inside by working with the materials. She endorses this first-hand experience saying:

I doubt if we would be able to invent the kinds of pedagogies needed for aesthetic education if we did not take time to ponder what the arts have signified for us, not only as teachers, but as distinctive human beings trying to make sense of our

lives. (Greene, 2001, p. 98)

I can imagine that those teachers leave the auditorium alive with inspiration. It is interesting that the occasion for Greene's words matches closely the broad teacher education setting in which I work, and indeed her words do inspire and advocate for the arts and aesthetics most convincingly.

The Ophelia moment of the poem that introduced the paper does appear to have observable features such as involvement and awareness that would identify it as an experience fitting an aesthetic framework. Fenner (2003) would agree that a specific experience such as that could be separated out as "aesthetic" to be observed as raw data for analysis, an example of the aesthetic experience is a part of life. But the cool analytic voice situated in the reality of the classroom sneaks in to ask of such claims "Yes but how do you know the participants really felt that?" and the cynical teacher voice asks "Yes and how do you do it?" Having located this discussion and its relevance in the field of aesthetic learning, the classroom realities that those practical voices imply will now be considered. The next two sections look at aesthetic learning in the classroom, and deal with ideas emerging from the introduction which are tied more closely to practice - the need for the shared language to talk about the experience of aesthetic learning; the teacher role in selecting and shaping material to enable that to happen; the teacher skill of noticing as a dimension of classroom practice; and the question of how to engage students in learning.

### **Aesthetic learning – making it real in the classroom**

The Ophelia experience referred to in the poem was certainly not talked about afterwards. If the moment had been noted, it would have been consigned to the sphere of subjectivity, an awkward area avoided by teachers at that time. But talking and finding the shared language is the key that Fleming (1999) identifies, the key which opens the opportunity to make real the transformative connection between teaching and learning for the learner. This is one aspect of making aesthetic learning real.

The value that Fleming has for my case is that he passes over any claim to mystifying inner aesthetic experience and asserts the arts and drama as valid aesthetic learning which can be talked about and acted upon. For Fleming (1999) the shared and communal cultural contexts of the arts and drama are essential, and sharing is by means of language. Drawing on the writing of Wittgenstein (1969), Fleming (1999) holds that a public language is perfectly adequate to describe and share what may have been regarded hesitantly as subjective aesthetic learning experiences – we just need to help students to do so. He shifts focus too to the aesthetic processes in teaching and learning, and argues for a more integrated view of the inner and outer dimensions of experience both from the perspective of learner and teacher. We

teachers need to be accountable and responsible for what happens in both those sites for learning and cannot just escape and leave the inner processes to blind faith. For Fleming, Wittgenstein's strength was his insistence that language is capable of discussing and sharing concepts of understanding and perceiving and responding. If those concepts are not locked away in a private realm, they can have more influence on how we think about and experience education. At 17, I was not helped to talk about the involvement and heightened awareness I felt in the Ophelia moment in the way that contemporary educators would. In the teacher education setting, finding and using the language to talk about aesthetic learning as it relates to thinking feeling and embodied responses in the drama classroom has to be modelled and practised, a process which can be enlightening and liberating, as later examples will discuss. A second aspect is the teacher role in selecting and shaping material. Aesthetic learning has to be stimulated by aesthetic teaching – the responsibility of the teacher. Cecily O'Neill (1993) has always stressed the importance of selecting and shaping the entry point for a drama experience, and of the astute use of the elements of theatre to shape dramawork. For Heathcote too the selection of material was crucial, and her writings contain much to guide a teacher's informed and wise choices about inclusion of elements in the teaching experience to enhance its aesthetic effect. She recommended (Heathcote, 1984a) that the contrasting elements of darkness and light, silence and sound, stillness and movement be used to make impact. She noted that she might not discuss the elements in any technical way with the students, but would take her lead from the emotional tenor of the group, indicating that as teacher she had to be observant of shifts in tone, and watchful for students' responses and reaction. Interesting that those words of guidance combine two aspects of aesthetic teaching - the sensory-based elements of contrast as a means of shaping drama meaning, and the teacher sensitivity to group mood and inclination. In another essay (Heathcote, 1984b) she refers to the material and the ideas explored needing to be of "significance", meaning that the drama needs to ring true and have some degree of compelling authenticity for both student and teacher. Drama has to be worth doing, and taught with awareness of aesthetic properties serves to enhance the worth of the learning.

The aesthetic teaching of drama (or of any subject) is also about giving students the tools to make it worthwhile and satisfying. Michael Anderson (2012) talks about the reality of the classroom and how educators need to help students engage with the art form, and "demystify the process of creation" (Anderson, p. 54) so that they can make art that is wondrous and fulfilling.

We are aesthetic educators and as such we engage with the aesthetics of our art form to help the young people we teach connect with the art form, to understand it, and ultimately we hope the world around them more. (2012, p. 54)



Anderson goes on to emphasise the active process in drama of engaging the audience and of the active thinking and responding work of appreciating that an audience has to do. He builds his discussion around paired and interdependent terms: “aesthetic control” by which he means the skills students develop in working with the art form, and the necessary interaction with appreciative skills of “aesthetic understanding”- two terms which capture the dual processes the educator instigates.

A third aspect is an educator skill, that of noticing, necessary for perceptive awareness in the classroom environment and for the aesthetic shaping of the experience. This brings me to the challenges student teachers face. The experienced practitioners referred to above have all developed over years of experience an expertise at noticing shifts in students’ responses, or signals that hold promise for a productive change of direction. Student teachers do not have the experience yet, but they can be assisted in the skill. In the teacher education setting, student teachers will of course be learning skills of observation and assessment in all their courses preparatory for classroom teaching, but in my years of teaching I have seen drama offer a different dimension of noticing. For the student teachers I work with, learning in drama is often a quite unusual and unaccustomed experience. Away from the security of desk and pen, they have to find ways of communicating with body, and have to listen and attend to others as they negotiate meaning in their work – and that statement itself is likely to sound very unfamiliar and disconcerting to a new student teacher. It is a challenge to give students a sense of the transformative learning potential in drama learning – they often assume somewhat glibly that drama will be all about letting children “express their feelings.” The learning process for the student teachers themselves must slow down and reflect on what they are doing and feeling to help them notice their own learning. Aesthetic learning does allow feeling and emotion to connect, and does have a transformative effect in relational learning. This is another insight handed down from Dewey, and the process has been recently researched and discussed by Sinclair (2012) and a researcher to whom she refers, Riddett-Moore (2009). Riddett-Moore’s investigation showed how an aesthetic experience encouraged empathy in her own classroom. Her work boosts the argument that such learning experiences are connective, memorable and potentially transformative, carrying learning beyond the individual. As Sinclair (2012) says

There is something distinctive about how and why children engage with the arts that enriches the education of the child in the broadest terms, beyond the cognitive acquisition of facts, which contributes to the development of creativity and imagination, and an understanding of the world. (p. 44)

Eisner (2008) too writes of how the arts teach a reading of the nuances of situations, a recognition of the subtle and the significant, and of the empathic feeling that knowing in the

arts brings. He refers to the way that response to artistic forms can “prompt an empathy that in turn makes action possible” (2008, p. 10). This ability to empathise, and then through compassion to act is the aspect of aesthetic learning that Bundy (2005) and Anderson (2012) have both referred to – the learning that is felt deeply enough to impel action.

The vignettes of experience included in this paper describe deeply felt incidents which had that potential, and which prompted reflections about awareness and noticing of responses that have been the subject of this section. Before the last incident however is the question of engagement. The final story, like the Ophelia moment, may have remained in the memories of students – but that implies that there was an atmosphere that had somehow drawn them in, and engaged their full attention. How do teachers do it?

### **Engaging students in learning**

Engagement is about both student and teacher, and aesthetic learning will be shaped by aesthetic and artistic modes of teaching. As teachers we know well how delicately balanced engagement in a classroom can be – how well students can fake attention while their minds are miles away, how we have to be alert to signals from the ones at the back, how we have to use powers of allure and persuasion to keep a large class together. One writer whose research offers a guide for how we might notice and describe student engagement is Penny Bundy. Bundy’s (2003, 2005) research has been very useful because it gives us the kind of language with which we can discuss and reflect on engagement. She writes about how opportunities for aesthetic engagement can be created and guided in the drama classroom. Engagement, she maintains, is marked by three key characteristics – animation, connection, and heightened awareness. She explains and further elaborates each characteristic using terms and descriptive features in a way that clearly enabled her students to talk about and report their own responses, which was her method of data gathering. Animation for example is a conscious feeling perhaps of exhilaration, while the heightened sense of awareness is described as being more aware of ourselves and the world around. She elaborates on the concept of connection, referring to an additional dimension that occurs when “the percipients must make some association between the world of the drama and their real world existence” (Bundy, 2003, p. 2). She stresses that it is the teacher/artist’s role to create the opportunities so that the characteristics can be experienced simultaneously in order to engage the learner aesthetically, and for significant learning to occur. Bundy’s later (2005) project furthered her understanding of children’s aesthetic engagement in response to drama/theatre experience. She focused particularly on how questions and interview techniques and analysis could assist the child participants to express their experiences, and the researchers to ascertain whether engagement had been experienced. The group interviews “encouraged dynamic conversation...and on the whole appeared to discourage them from trying to say what they thought we...wanted to hear” (Bundy, 2005, p. 10).

**A provocation for imagination and engagement:****Student teachers think about another unfortunate lady**

Bundy's emphasis on the teacher/artist role in creating opportunities for aesthetic engagement, and her findings about the value of a group interview are relevant to my current teacher education context. This paper opened with my own remembered classroom incident which at the time went unremarked but floated into a deeper sensory memory. I draw the discussion now into the lessons it has had for my own teaching, and include a vignette of a contemporary teaching incident with student teachers, a drama experience infused with potential for aesthetic learning. I am continually searching for ways to engage and hook students preparing to be primary/elementary school teachers into using drama in their classroom practice. Courses for these future teachers are unfortunately short, with five short sessions to grab attention, model practice and capture commitment. It is all the more important to me therefore to create a short sharp memorable experience that will have an impact, something that will allow an inside -out view, that will make them aware of their own responses, that we can use as a shared starting point for talking, something that might just stay in their memories. How then has it played out in my own classes?

*In their first drama class, the student teachers read a short genuine newspaper extract from early last century – a brief account in antiquated language of a bus trip that went distressingly wrong when fractious horses bolted downhill to crash into a substantial watering trough, overturning and crushing an unfortunate lady passenger. She had declined the chance to alight when trouble first appeared, and sadly expired in the arms of her daughter, crushed by the toppled bus. We discuss how text such as this might be woven purposefully into a classroom programme – language features, social context, reporting style. The lack of a photograph is easily brought to life with a tableau, placing and animating the close, middle and distant views of the event. We talk about taking on the roles of some of the people who were there to discover more about the event through an imagined backstory, and I model role taking as the bus driver to coax speculation about the preceding circumstances. Volunteers for interview take other roles - first a gossipy bystander and then a council representative who smoothly diverts any blame from his public transport system. Anxiety has by now heightened, and the class is desperate to speak to the daughter, to probe her side to the tragedy. Finally they get their way - to be faced with a skinny girl sitting on her hands and biting her lip, hunched shoulders and head lowered, hair hiding her eyes, legs dangling miserably. She responds to their brash questions with simply a shrug, a quivering suck of breath, a sniff, and silence...*

The quietness in the room stretches and waits and I see dawning slowly on their faces the mixed belief and disbelief that I remembered from the Ophelia moment. We gently move into a reflective discussion, and the student teachers gradually gain confidence in talking about their own emotional responses. They are often relieved to find that others had similar reactions, and have often talked in embodied language about deciding how to talk to the daughter once they saw her represented before them (“it was like a hit in the stomach”; “it grabbed me”). They discuss their own insights into the people in the story, the dimensions behind the story that drama has opened, and the moments that made it real. On some occasions student teachers have admitted never having really thought about the after effects of the accident, and they frequently acknowledge that the in-role representation of the girl, depicted and presented with aesthetic awareness, suddenly made them see things differently. The source text would be easily manageable for students in their sixth year of primary/elementary school, and the student teachers move on to consider how language learning would have been enriched for classroom students, how imaginative engagement had been built, and how the context may lead to discussions about many topics, from accidents to grief to interviewers’ sensitivity. Like Bundy, I consider the discussion a way of encouraging conversation, and of giving students confidence in recognising and talking about their own heightened awareness and body responses, as well of course as distinguishing the contextual relevance to teaching.

Discussion works two ways however. I have learned to draw out and deepen the conversation with careful questions, and have had to challenge myself to pursue hints and to wait for the words that will divulge and perhaps reveal deeper thinking. I have had to find and use the language to talk about aesthetic learning as it relates to thinking feeling and embodied responses. The experience re-awakened in some of my students the recall of other sharp, memorable learning moments, and we have talked about experiences in the arts, the moments of animation they had noted in the drama, the value of joining the enjoyable with the strongly impactful, and connections to their own past learning. If I can provide for those aesthetic moments, if I can help them notice, be aware, talk about responses and feelings, they may be to use Greene’s term, be a little more “wide awake.” Just as the memory and the understanding inside-out of the Ophelia moment pushed me to lead a teaching experience with more confidence and insight, so the overturned bus story will I hope help student teachers see drama’s impact and take it into their own emerging practice.

I made the proposition at the beginning of the paper that that if prospective teachers develop an awareness of their own responses to experiences in the arts, they can be better prepared for noticing and crafting their own aesthetic teaching practice. I take inspiration from Barone (1983) who echoes Dewey when he says

a truly educational experience is likely to possess certain fundamentally aesthetic attributes. Among these...are an aesthetic dynamic form, buoyant emotional qualities, and a vital tension between the experiencer and the experienced. (p. 22)

The unfortunate lady and the bus incident did exhibit the aesthetic attributes that Barone and Dewey both identified in a truly educational experience. It was unified in structure, and moved through stages (from text exploration to a “what if” question initiating the group tableau to wondering what individuals might have seen or heard or felt). Emotion built as pieces of story shaped around emerging characters such as the council representative, and expectancy and tension grew from speculation about the bereaved daughter and her situation. I have learned too to step back and let the artform do its own work. I hope that the experience will have an impact, and have learned to sense and pace my work in crafting the moment with a sense of artistry. In this way, Barone’s example is similar and encouraging, for he contextualises his discussion in an account of a classroom and he situates his comments within Dewey’s theorising, claiming both teaching and learning as aesthetic and artistic activities. Speaking of any classroom experience he says that the aesthetic form should have emotional qualities that extend beyond the immediate ideas and a vitality which sparks between the work and the experiencer. The Ophelia experience sparked me to think about the aesthetic and to hope that if I provide educational experiences with those characteristics, I may assist student teachers in time to prepare their own rich teaching experiences.

### **Aesthetic learning and action**

Aesthetic learning and its concept of a resultant “awakening” implies more than just heightened alertness to response, sense, and presence. For arts practitioners and arts teachers, for our work to have real impact, the focus of heightened attention needs to shift beyond the self to the action the self could take in the wider world. The concluding section of this paper will first reconsider through a theoretical lens how the Ophelia incident transformed into useable knowledge for application in the author’s working context, and will relate it to the vignette of the student teachers and their learning. Then, the section turns to the potential the field of aesthetic education holds for learning for both student teachers and the children they will teach as the century moves on and new solutions and answers are sought. Barone (1983) said that “a truly educational experience is likely to possess certain fundamentally aesthetic attributes” (p. 22), and arts educators recognise that the kinds of experiences promoted through good teaching in partnership with those encountered through good art hold an optimism for the future.

The remembered Ophelia incident was transformed and then applied in my own teaching by a

process of reflection on action. The aesthetic impact of *the unfortunate lady and the bus incident* became evident as I taught it over repeated episodes, and I hoped that it too might be fixed as a strong enough memory to prompt the student teachers to reflect on their reactions and, later, to make a conscious effort to infuse their own teaching with a sense of the aesthetic. In my case, pausing, re-examining the Ophelia memory, drawing out images for re-creation in poetic form, conceptualising the aesthetic nature of the experience were all parts of a reflective process before the incident could be used and applied effectively in another context. The process of transforming experience into action however does not just happen. As I taught the unfortunate lady and the bus episodes, I sensed in the students the heightened awareness that Bundy (2003) refers to, and the sparked intensity of belief and emotional investment that Greene (2001) speaks of. Greene suggests that aesthetic education should open new vistas and offer opportunities for learning through noticing and looking with new eyes and ears, and that by imagining, students would be enabled to look at things and think about things “as if they were otherwise” (p. 65). She refers to “opening windows on alternative realities” (p. 44) and to challenging the taken for granted. Before the student teachers could make sense of the experience with a view to using such a process in their own practice, however, they first had to examine their own reactions, and understand how the roles and the drama moment had been shaped. For that to happen, the moment needed to be talked about, the language found to describe and share, and the feelings put into words, all a part of transforming the experience into real learning. Both their own responses and teacher decisions needed examination.

Kolb (1984) writes of how experiential learning becomes knowledge by shifting from concrete experience through reflective observation to an abstract conceptualisation. In the case of the remembered Ophelia incident, this had culminated in a poetic representation. In my teaching I had students experiment with various writing genres – writing in role, use of metaphor, or writing a dream. For Schön (1983), reflection-on-action is the groundwork for future action, and drama work that followed the first episode experimented with a different time context to provoke further thinking within the drama. The message was made contemporary, for example, to shift consideration of the historical bus incident to the present day to question and confront just how responsible or compassionate onlookers’ reactions to public incidents really are. Aesthetic learning is about more than recognising one’s responses, and Greene’s (2001) “opening windows on alternative realities”(p. 44) and challenging the taken for granted was another layer of significance provoked by a shift in time and place. Though the idea of taking action has been present since the writings of Dewey, practitioners currently writing about practice insist that the aesthetic be infused with social responsibility. Bundy’s (2003) work has already pointed out her requirement for a connection to the real world, as has Michael Anderson’s (2012) intention that educators help students to a connection and understanding of the world around them. Kathleen Gallagher (2005) too sees

aesthetic learning opening up possibilities beyond participants' lives. She writes of "provoked imagination," where, within the creative framed drama space there is a deliberate "probing" which nudges at the imagination, provoking it, and with those conditions there is likely to be the a "shock of recognition" (a term Gallagher borrows from Bruner) which shifts understanding. That such an experience is likely to occur in a collective group situation, she maintains, can offer the potential for children to be opened to things beyond their immediate lives. The progressive development of the bus incident drama work prompted a deepened reflection on its significance.

Gallagher (2005) also addresses the perspective of the teacher, when she talks of the mission to cultivate truly educational experiences so that both perception and interpretation build a sense of growing meaning for participants. Each time I observed the scene's impact I learnt a little more about how as facilitator I could sense and lift energy or manage mood, and I reflected on how the teaching episode worked and how the participants could learn from it. To be able to transform it into useful learning for practice, the student teachers also needed to see and comprehend the teacher decisions. Those teaching moments, often made on the spur of the moment and in response to the mood of the group, do need to be made explicit for teachers in order to see how artistry is applied. The reflective phase of the drama is where student teachers can be assisted to integrate the personal significance and the pedagogy of drama, encouraging a balance of the perspectives of teacher, educator, and learner (O'Toole, Stinson & Moore, 2009).

Participatory learning with accompanying informed reflection can also help student teachers make practical embodied (or enacted) sense of what they hear and learn in courses about educational theory. Of experiential learning, Heron (1989) adopts a humanistic view in the tradition of Rogers and Maslow, and stresses the importance for the learner of identifying the patterns in the process to assist conceptualisation and ultimately application. Understanding their own learning patterns will help student teachers observe, understand and assist their own students' patterns. The experiences discussed in this paper both began with a surface experience. Both were deepened and conceptualised - as a poem in one case, as role-taking of another perspective in the other. Both were reshaped and exposed for discussion and interrogation – and in this sense both have become what Bereiter (2002) calls conceptual artefacts – experiences that have been considered, recalled, reflected on, and are open to being further reconceptualised. For teachers, Bereiter believes, such artefacts, from their base in experience, hold promise for future thinking as the materials continue to be argued, reviewed, reshaped and re-theorised.

A student teacher's preparation for teaching will cover many styles of experiential learning in various contexts with numerous versions for reflection – but many are likely to be viewed or

read or heard about in large group delivery. Aesthetic learning and teaching, accompanied by reflexive review with others, allows the student teacher to discover and start to embed a more holistic concept of practice from the inside out. The leader/facilitator role of selecting material, enticing engagement, shaping process and then later revealing method are for the receptive learner matched by roles of recognising responses, observing reactions, noticing teacher actions, conceptualising process and retaining an image of the progression for later application. The joint activity of reflection on the action begins to theorise the process. If the aesthetic attributes and form and qualities of the teaching and learning experience are made transparent, there can be hope for new currents of jolts of understanding and shivers of awakening and sparks of imagination to ripple outwards into classrooms.

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### **About the Author**

Elizabeth Anderson is a Senior Lecturer in drama in the Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland. Her doctorate in education researched the characteristics of effective

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