Aesthetic Experience, Hermeneutics, and Curriculum

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones
Arizona State University

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Over the years there have been many attempts to develop sound reasons for including the arts in education. In the more recent attempts, such as those by the developers of Discipline Based Arts Education,[1] Maxine Greene's work in a phenomenological, existentialist approach,[2] Sheryle Bergmann-Drewe's work on reasoning,[3] and Donald Arnstine's response to Drewe,[4] the focus has been on knowledge enhancement. In this essay I am going to take issue with this approach and offer another way to value the arts for education. To begin with I will review Drewe's and Arnstine's work as good examples of the knowledge approach.

Drewe, in "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts in the Educational Curriculum," makes an argument for including the arts in the educational curriculum based on "their potential to foster understanding on the part of the participants of artistic activity...the understanding attained through participation in the arts is a particular sort of understanding; a rich understanding."[5] Her form of "participation in the arts" is: students as consumers of other people's artistic productions.[6] She favors an instrumental over an intrinsic justification and asserts that one must choose art images which have content that will, in turn, have "potential for expanding students' understanding."[7] These images should not be merely propagandistic but should add to the store of rich understanding. The knowledge generated by interactions with these art images attends to "sensations and feelings"[8] experienced through interaction with artistic form. What gives educational validation to these sensations experienced through form is the development of "interpretive reasoning" grounded in "shared artistic concepts [which lead to] the attainment of a rich understanding."[9] This rich understanding is, in turn, based in a "body of knowledge [which] makes it possible to provide reasons for making aesthetic judgments which are not purely subjective."[10]

Donald Arnstine, in his reply to her propositions, takes her to task for three reasons. First, not all art pieces will foster understanding because some art has no content (and so understanding of the human experience will not flow from such art)[11]and, additionally, Drewe leaves "the concept of understanding inchoate."[12] Second, Drewe excises as educationally illegitimate the very quality of art experiences which Arnstine deems central: "[P]eople...find [art] fascinating, absorbing, compelling, entertaining ...amusing."[13] People attend to the arts because the arts are enjoyable. Lastly, this enjoyable quality is functional in schools. He writes,

> To be serious about the arts in the curriculum is to be serious about holding the attention of students. If we introduce arts into schools that are appropriate for the children we teach, their enjoyment and their engrossment...will enrich their sensuous awareness of the form of things in the world. And some art...will also direct their attention to things in the world we care about, things they might not otherwise consider.[14]

Both Drewe's and Arnstine's discussions focus upon epistemological reasons, concerned with the kind of knowledge available to us through encounters with artworks. They also position students as consumers of art. There are at least two reasons why these foci seriously limit valuing the arts in education. First, if we take a purely epistemological stance, the mind/body dualism, which has plagued the arts for hundreds of years, becomes reinstantiated. This dualism, through a focus on understanding and knowing as the *sine qua non* of educative experience, does a disservice to understanding human experience in its wholeness. Second, positioning students purely as consumers of art misconstrues the educative possibilities of aesthetic experience by excessively narrowing it.

To counter these two problems we need to start not with the arts but, rather, with aesthetic experience as a life value and, then, find our way back to the arts. In so doing we can discover what is unique about the arts and, therefore, their intrinsic value. Through this discovery we can possibly show why the arts are necessary to education.

Aesthetic experience is a particular way of *being in the world* which brings enhancement to all we do. If we take "enhancement of all we do" as a fundamental educative good and can particularize it within aesthetics, then we are justified in seeking ways of bringing about aesthetic experience through our educative endeavors. (I shall, later on, point to what I mean by enhancement.)

Let us begin by noting that in educational experience we address more than cognition and mental feelings and, thus, are not restricted to questions of epistemology. Through educational experience we learn ways to be and these ways, perhaps more than cognitive learning, stay with us throughout our lives. (How else to explain the physical aversion some adults, who were successful students, have to schools?) Put more strongly, educational experiences of all sorts are embodied experiences. Student's bodily responses to their physical and social environment in schools reveal this as they respond to teaching and their physical environment (rejecting, accepting, ignoring teaching and so forth) in obvious physical ways (squirming, sitting rigidly, leaning forward eagerly, becoming ill or nauseated, sleeping, lolling and so forth).

Whether we desire it or not, students live bodily in school, albeit non-aesthetically (because non-intentionally). Such lived experiences may be productive of an "understanding" or educative outcome, but only if we can become aware of our educated bodies. Aesthetic experience, because it focuses on the senses, is particularly well-positioned to aid us in coming to this experience (in both a critical and a generative way). The arts, as an already well-established form of aesthetic living, can provide the specific experiences that lead on to such aesthetic experience. As you will see, I do not mean a studio experience in the usual sense (gaining technical expertise in an art) but an experience which joins intellect and body. The mind/body dualism is avoided by finding that understanding is ontological as well as epistemological in character. In this position ontology and epistemology are bound together through experience, in this case aesthetic experience. Due to the current focus upon epistemology, my argument will revolve around an ontological

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discussion, examining aesthetic experience, exploring understanding (drawing on hermeneutics) to uncover its ontological character (although we may usually think of hermeneutics as epistemological, as a knowledge producing practice) and drawing aesthetics and hermeneutics together in the arts. I will insert discussions of arts experiences as necessary. As a way of organizing the argument I shall draw upon the influential work of James B. Macdonald, the late curriculum theorist.[15]

Aesthetic Experience

James Macdonald and David Purpel, in discussing various possibilities for envisioning curricular decisions, rejected means-ends, calculative, technological rationality as the basis for curricular thinking, favoring, instead, "values." [16] Among these values was "the aesthetic," of which they wrote,

> The critique [of conventional approaches to curriculum thinking] from an *aesthetic* point of view addresses the basic problem of the separation of means from ends inherent in the technical planning approach. Thus, ends are stated and means are then emphasized. In many instances, the means become another sort of ends in themselves. Aesthetically many activities are worth doing for the sake of engagement in them, and the value of such activity lies in the dynamics of *participation*. The outcomes of such pursuits are neither known nor relevant to the justification for doing them. Thus, inherent in an aesthetic concern is the realization that outcomes of any tangible sort are unknowable until after the fact.[17]

They conclude by writing, "The activity of the [curriculum] planning process must be to some extent self-justifying in human terms, not merely justified by some efficient and effective outcome."[18]

I have emphasized the word "participation" in order to highlight that it is not enough to encounter someone else's art production in order to value arts experiences. Living aesthetically is an active participation in the world through one's senses, the outcome of such engagement being unknowable beforehand (as Macdonald and Purpel have asserted), but having a profound effect on one's sense of place and value in the world. In fairness to Drewe, she does prefer "art for meaning's sake" over "art for art's sake."[19] However, over against her emphasis upon discovering the meaning of art works, I would place the act of discovering personal meaning as basic to aesthetic living.[20]

A search for meaning is not a solipsistic act. It is a search for experiencing connection with others in our world as well as with our physical and social environment. This connectedness carries with it an experience of wholeness (however temporary this experience may be) and is my primary meaning of "educational enhancement." Aesthetic experience, of any kind, engenders this experience of wholeness through a sensory engagement with the world, but the primary experience is one's own attempts at making art for it is in this activity that understanding becomes consciously embodied which is central to aesthetic experience.[21] Along with this one should encounter others' art works as further exploration of one's own productions. These encounters can illuminate the *process of meaning making as an aesthetic experience* but are not sufficient to engender aesthetic experience as I have particularized it.

Two aspects of *meaning* need further development: What is the value of this personal meaning? and How do we gain meaning? Macdonald speaks to personal meaning as follows.

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> Personal knowledge brings depth to meaning and reflects the uniqueness of our own experiences. The connotation we bring to words, the commitments we give to certain ideas, or the perceptual selections we make from among relevant alternatives are all predicated upon and integrated through the unique being of each individual.[22]

In order to ground this I will provide some of my personal experience.

Riding my bicycle this afternoon after reading Macdonald's "Theory, Practice, and the Hermeneutic Circle" I was struck by the afternoon's light. I rode slowly, very slowly, deciding quite consciously not to hurry but to ride so that I knew where I was, riding not in an instrumental fashion (getting from one place to another) but riding for the sake of riding. Macdonald wrote about the mytho-poetic [or aesthetic] as the missing position in curriculum theory. We have already had enough of the instrumental, technical rationality and, also, of the critical theory aspects of the practice, approaches which while valuable and, even, contributing in good ways, yet miss the understanding which can only come through this personal moment, this mytho-poetic. Our personal experience becomes the site of this mytho-poetic which, simultaneously, transcends the immediate being because it belongs to the culture, not to any one individual.

Let me elaborate: My family and I try to go camping when we can. Now, our camping is no primitive back-country permit camping. Nevertheless we live, for however long, in a tent and cook our food on a small propane stove. I always feel, during these experiences, especially relaxed and connected to something, to the earth, to my self, and these others, my family. Something ineffable happens to my mind when I do this. I always say that every teacher should go camping: there is something almost spiritual about it. Although I do not know what that means, "spiritual," I do know that I feel refreshed in an important way. Riding my bicycle this afternoon back to campus I felt the same way: connected, not in a hurry but not drifting or lost either.

I thought, as I rode, this too is curriculum theory. I felt able to think but not so much in words. Rather, as I gazed at the small hill in the distance, rather barren, a desert, but, for me, also beautiful and satisfying, I felt I could think about myself and my connections without having to explicitly state what myself was or what the connections might be which I was feeling. It was slow; it was warm; it was full. "Full:" this is an important word. The experience is one of solidity, not emptiness. Of course, having a place to go, a destination, may have allowed me to feel this fullness. I can imagine that, were I homeless, I would not feel full about this experience for being out-of-doors would only be my daily state of existence, no different from *my* present life as a householder for whom a house and a place of work are merely a common-place experience.

In this experience two features are significant. First, the experience was embodied and it was through this agency that the wholeness of the experience was mediated. Second, in this aesthetic state of wholeness, connections were made between particularities of my situation as these became apparent to me such as my thinking about all the people driving their cars to somewhere (probably instrumentally) and contrasting this with both the homeless and my own situation. Through

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this aesthetic experience (conscious embodiment of meaning) understandings became available.

How Do We Gain Meaning? Understanding

Just as aesthetics is ontological in character, so, too, is the gaining of meaning. Macdonald states this position directly when he thinks through three possible sources of curricular knowledge.

> It is my opinion that the hermeneutic circle of understanding lies within each of the epistemologies [technical-rational, critical-emancipatory and mytho-poetic] and also transcends each method in the form of an ontological platform....The three methods [epistemologies]...are contributory methodologies to a larger hermeneutic circle of continual search for greater understanding, and for a more satisfying interpretation of what *is*.[23]

Through this "satisfying interpretation" our lives gain a measure of meaningfulness. An exploration of hermeneutics as ontological can help make this more clear by describing hermeneutics as a practice in the world.

According to David Smith, Martin Heidegger viewed hermeneutics as,

> the foundational practice of Being itself. Interpretation is the means by which the nature of Being and human be-ing is disclosed. Interpretation is the primordial condition of human self-understanding so that a phenomenology of Being reveals its fundamental mode to be precisely hermeneutical...interpretation...[is] the primordial mode of human existence.[24]

Paul Ricoeur asserts that meaningful action can be analogized to a text. He derives his argument from Max Weber's sociological theory and posits that if meaningful action is like a text then our interpretation of the meaning of such action occurs through a hermeneutical process.[25] Hans-Georg Gadamer writes on play as exemplary of the hermeneutic process, in a section of his central work, *Truth and Method*, entitled "Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation."[26] As children become fully immersed in play they are in a state of what might be called "being otherwise" as they are living a different being for a time. For play to be efficacious, play must attain the status of a living reality. During the process of play, children will emerge from this reality, recognizing that they have been "being otherwise." They will *note* (an epistemological verb) what they have been *doing* (an ontological verb) and will make decisions about what to do next (an epistemological and ontological process) and then reimmerse themselves in the play. All of this suggests that hermeneutics is part of our daily existence, rather than only a way of knowing about our daily existence. We make sense and act on the basis of a hermeneutical process. This, then, is what I think Macdonald means when he emphasizes the word "is."

Hermeneutics is an experience which is embodied. In order for Being and action to have reality, they have reality through the body. Gadamer, in particular, must be referencing the body, as for instance, when he states that "the mode of being of play is...close to the mobile form of nature"[27] or when he writes of the "behavior" of play. While his discussion is not exclusively about the body, it is difficult to understand his ideas without picturing the actual, physical embodiment of play.

The hermeneutic character of being reveals both personal and social dimensions. That which is understood (whether it be a text, a meaningful action, play, or the composing of art) is understood within a context (horizon) comprised of one's

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personal history and the history of the experience. For instance, in terms of texts, as I read Shakespeare I bring to the text my experiences with theaters and Shakespearean plays (productions I may have attended). I also bring my knowledge of what other people have made of the play (perhaps through conversations with my friends, perhaps through reading about the history of the play). These experiences and knowledge comprise the horizon within which I will now encounter *this* play. In terms of meaningful actions, if I participate in an annual meeting of a professional organization I bring to this experience my own history with such meetings and what I can garner about this particular organization from those who have already experienced such meetings. As for play, the very structure of play encompasses the personal (I and those with whom I play choose the kind of game and the way the game proceeds based on our history with playing and our present needs fulfilled through playing) and the social (what I and the others know about "playing" and "games" that we have learned from others). Art making speaks for itself: the personal expression is inevitably mediated through the personal choices made within the context of what I already have learned about art, my own experiences with making art, and my personal relationship with myself as an art-maker.

Hermeneutics, then, is more than a knowledge generating process. It is, simultaneously, a way of experiencing in which experiencing and making sense of experiencing are fused. This wholeness makes it akin to aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic Experience, Play, Meaningful Action and Art-Making

In order to understand aesthetic experience and the arts as ontological understanding and as linked, we can begin by looking no further than Gadamer's work on aesthetics. Gadamer's discussion of aesthetic experience begins in a discussion of the ontology of play (referenced above) which he takes as paradigmatic to the making of art. He, then, proceeds to elaborate the process of hermeneutical understanding.

My examination of the process of playing can be used to illustrate the ontological centrality of the hermeneutic circle to meaningful action and art-making. The circle references the whole/part relationship in which the whole is only known one part at a time and in order to make sense of each part I must have a sense of the whole. When playing, children move in and out of active play, noting, reflecting, consciously redirecting activity and returning to the activity of play. This cycle is enacted over and over again and an understanding of play is only possible when we see how all parts of the circle are necessary to the play. Meaningful action is similar. Take "meaningful action" to mean "separate actions taken by the actors in a social (or sociological) situation" and take "action" to reference "the whole action (such as a cocktail party) in which the interlocutors in the action are improvising their interactions," much like a board game. These actions exist within the framework of people's mutual (or conflicting) cultures which provide the parameters for the interactions; thus, the cultural parameters may be taken as describing the completed action or the whole. What actually emerges through the meaningful actions (the parts of the emerging whole action) is a new action, not fully predictable by the cultural boundaries or wholes. It is a social action not fully

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described by either the individual, personal actions of the actors nor by the cultural boundaries which describe the culturally ideal action. Something both new and old is realized.

No less may be said of art-making. As the art piece unfolds, I project a possible finished work which is constantly modified by the actual making process and the resultant and emerging form. The parts only cohere as there is a whole within which they can cohere. This image is one of oscillation, moving back and forth between the whole and the emerging work. The circle may also be construed as a spiral through which the art piece constantly presents new wholes and new possibilities for new parts. Where I begin and where I plan to go with the development of the art piece never remain the same. New possibilities only emerge through the action of making and meditating upon the making and the physicality of the art piece.

In attending in an embodied way to the fusion of the personal and the social through the ongoing circularity of knowing and doing which is experienced during play, meaningful action, and art-making we may be said to be experiencing aesthetically. As I have already discussed, in the section "Aesthetic Experience," the "good" of such experience is, exactly, the experience of connections between myself, others and my environment. An hermeneutic description of process reveals that consciousness of hermeneutics provides critical and generative aspects for aesthetic experience. I can learn to be critical of my actions (including but not limited to art action) as I view these actions within the process itself, asking myself such questions as "What do I want to have happen here? How can I bring it about? What aspects are being successful, in terms of my desires? What aspects are not being successful? What can I know from the traditions of this practice that could aid me in both understanding and executing my desires? What historical precedents exist for these desires and this practice?" Given that the practice of hermeneutics requires the hermeneut to be sensitive to the whole context (or horizon) of a particular action to be understood, I can also learn to be critical through such questions as, "Why do I desire this particular action? What cultural conditions bring me to such a desire? How does my desire emanate from my interactions with others and how does the carrying out of my desires effect those others?"

We can, now, conceptualize art making as contributing to aesthetic experience and understanding. The generation or making of art, especially when thought of as a species of play, is aligned with an understanding that play is regenerative as it brings new understandings to the players about their relationship to others and their environment. Making art is a meaningful social action as the maker, in order to both make and comprehend the art-piece, comes in contact both with her/his personal and social being. This suggests that the arts may be educationally justified not because of the ways we can understand ourselves through mature art works but, rather, because of the ways we can understand ourselves and live in a particular way through the making of our own art works. The examination of mature art-works can contribute to the process of art-making but because such examination displaces onto others our own generativity, and therefore our own connection-making capacities, we become merely spectators. Through aesthetic experience in a consciously

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hermeneutic fashion we can become active in forming our own world rather than accepting the world of others. We can justify the place of the arts in education because of their unique capacity to both, as Macdonald would have it, enable our "insight, visualization and imagination…awe, wonder and anxiety"[28] and because they enable us to become embodied in a critical and generative fashion.

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1. Gilbert Clark, Michael Day, and Dwaine Greer, "Discipline-Based Art Education: Becoming Students of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (Summer 1987):129-93.

2. For example, Maxine Greene, "Towards Wide-Awakeness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education," in *Landscapes of Learning*, ed. Maxine Greene (N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 1978), 161-67.

3. Sheryle Bergmann-Drewe, "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts in the Educational Curriculum," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995),174-81.

4. Donald Arnstine, "Justifying the Arts in Schools" in Neiman, *Philosophy of Education 1994*,182-84.

5. Drewe, "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts," 174.

6. She is not alone in this focus on consumerism. Both DBAE proponents and Greene generally focus upon students as art consumers.

7. Drewe, "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts," 174.

8. Ibid., 178.

9. Ibid., 179, 180.

10. Ibid.

11. Arnstine is, I think, clearly wrong on the point that some art-work has no content. Abstract expressionist painting, for instance, has the content of reflecting the dynamic mood of the artist and, simultaneously, allowing us to experience her/his rhythms as our own. In this experiencing we have the opportunity to reflect upon the rhythms of our own moods. In another mode, Robert Motherwell's paintings on the Spanish Civil War are abstract expressionism yet, because he names them, we can "read" concrete meaning into them.

12. Arnstine, "Justifying the Arts," 182-83.

13. Ibid., 183.

14. Ibid., 184.

15. James B. Macdonald, "Language, Meaning and Motivation: An Introduction" in *Language and Meaning*, ed. James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper (Washington D.C.: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, 1966), 1-7. James B. Macdonald, "How Literal is Curriculum Theory?" *Theory Into Practice* 21, no.1 (1982): 55-61. James B. Macdonald and David E. Purpel, "Curriculum and Planning: Visions and Metaphors," in *Curriculum: An Introduction to the Field*, ed. James R. Gress with the assistance of David E. Purpel (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1988), 305-21. James B. Macdonald, "Theory, Practice and the Hermeneutic Circle" in *Theory as a Prayerful Act: The Collected Essays of James B. Macdonald*, ed. Bradley J. Macdonald (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 173-86.

16. Macdonald and Purpel, "Curriculum and Planning," 308.

17. Ibid., 309, first emphasis in the original, second emphasis added.

18. Ibid., 310.

19. Drewe, "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts," 175.

20. In arguing for personal meaning I do not mean to reiterate the expressivist ideology of art. Rather, personal meaning is that aspect of meaning (inevitably derived from our acculturation) which we experience as particular to our personhood and in which we recognize ourselves as the nexus of our socio-cultural-political-biological experience.

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21. I do not want to be misunderstood as favoring art experiences which, through wholeness and connection, fit a person into the world as it exists. Art which disturbs and displaces also gives an experience of connection, through a revelation of the fractures which mark us.

22. Macdonald, "Language, Meaning," 4.

23. Macdonald, "How Literal," 57, emphasis in the original.

24. David G. Smith, "The Hermeneutic Imagination and the Pedagogic Text," in *Pedagon: Meditations on Pedagogy and Culture*, ed. David Geoffrey Smith (Bragg Creek, Alberta, Canada: Makyo Press, 1994): 109.

25. Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essay on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. J.G. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 197-221.

26. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1975).

27. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 96.

28. Macdonald, "Theory, Practice," 179.

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