

Original Paper

Art and Aesthetic Education

Dina A.M. Lutfi^{1*}

¹ Assistant Professor, College of Design, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia

* Dina A.M. Lutfi, College of Design, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: dal2164@tc.columbia.edu

Received: March 7, 2020

Accepted: March 14, 2020

Online Published: March 17, 2020

doi:10.22158/jrph.v3n1p19

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jrph.v3n1p19>

Abstract

This paper explores Maxine Greene's views on aesthetic pedagogy and the notion of social imagination, in addition to Grant Kester's views on dialogical art. These approaches are a call for action in art education, in addition to aesthetic approaches that can be applied in other fields of education. Aesthetic pedagogy offers educators and students a sense of intellectual autonomy, and may also facilitate alternative ways of generating meaning. I argue that making art is one part of the educational experience, however, aesthetic experiences also occur when people look at art and discuss it collectively. I encourage educators to adopt an approach of discovery, which is fueled by the outcome of open-ended discussions, and mainly focuses on different individual experiences. Educators may create opportunities for change through engaging in aesthetic experiences in their own daily lives and practices. Aesthetic experiences and aesthetic education foster independent thinking in students and encourages them to be more mindful of their feelings, surroundings, and expressions. Young minds should be educated to be inquisitive, to critique, and become open to possibilities and experiences they may have not considered, which transforms learning from passive to active.

Keywords

aesthetic education, aesthetic imagination, aesthetic experience, art education

1. Introduction

Aesthetic pedagogy approaches art from the perspective of understanding experiences, and creating individual meanings from those experiences. This school of thought has the capacity to approach education in a more ethical and relational way anywhere in the world, and at different levels of education. It is imperative to stress that aesthetic education is associated with those familiar with art; it is generally understood as the study of formal aspects of different works of art, studying theories about the beauty of art, artistic techniques, media that artists use, and the context or history in which the

works of art were created (Flannery, 1973). However, another meaning of aesthetic education does not require knowledge about art, but rather an awareness of one's own senses and feelings; these are known as sensory knowledge and sensuous knowledge, respectively (Flannery, 1973; Kovach, 1970). Many people are accustomed to experiencing everyday occurrences using more than one sense simultaneously. However, an awareness of the function of each sense individually can heighten experiences and the perception of those experiences even without prior knowledge of a subject, or in the case of experiencing an event for the first time, "the possibilities of sensory knowledge are amazing when one considers all the smells, sounds, body motions, and the variations of each that are possible to us" (Flannery, 1973, p. 10). Sensuous knowledge is also identified as concrete knowledge; it can be explained as an awareness of one's own feelings, which is an important component in fostering a sense of being wide awake in the process of one's own education (Kerdeman, 2005).

2. Awakening Education

Maxine Greene's notion of wide-awakeness as a social and ethical consciousness encompasses the aesthetic pedagogy that is social imagination. In her book, *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), Greene described wide-awakeness as "an awareness of what it means to be in the world" (p. 35); in order to experience this state of being awake, educators may pose questions, in educational settings, which encourage students to think about how they relate to their surroundings to make learning interactive. This enables students to practice becoming independent thinkers rather than telling them how and what to think. Greene also argued that the arts play a significant role in fostering an ethical education. Educators may advocate for an aesthetic pedagogy as a philosophy that aims to understand artistic production, experiences, and perceptions that connect the individual to their communities, and, consequently, the world (Greene, 2007). Through the lens of aesthetic pedagogy, social imagination may be constructed as renewable visions of one's social reality, which entails considering the possibilities of what could be, how to respond to what we encounter, and what changes we may envision in relation to others. Social imagination may induce students to become not only more imaginative, but relationally imaginative, and active learners; it is not gained all of a sudden, but is a process that speaks to becoming a social being, and being fully present to respond to life's encounters, as Greene (1988) explained, "To undertake a search is, of course, to take an initiative, to refuse stasis and the flatness of ordinary life" (p. 122).

It is not only the objective of the educator and the student to search, but to also encourage the rejection of passiveness or "stasis". Young minds must be educated to be inquisitive, to critique, and become open to possibilities and experiences they may have not considered (Greene, 2001; Uhrmacher, 2009). Through aesthetic education, and social imagination, educators not only expose students to art and everyday experiences, but also to texts about art, which adds a sense of dimensionality to verbal and visual meanings. In addition to the learner becoming active in their own education, he or she also begins to understand the advantage of plurality (Steenberg, 2007; Spector, Lake, & Kress, 2018). There

are, however, challenges that reside in approaching social imagination in this so-called relational way as there will always be students who may not be confident in voicing their own opinions, let alone empowered to imagine a new way of being through social imagination (Greene, 2007; Joy & Sherry, 2003). Other challenges are considering what impact social imagination could have on students who have never imagined an alternative reality for themselves; what consequences would social imagination have on them socially and culturally? Such questions consider the positive or negative potential social imagination may offer, which places responsibility on the educator who embraces this pedagogy. However educators must be willing to take the risk of placing themselves in the same positions as their students as Greene (1988) argued, “a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own” (p. 14).

The premise of social imagination, according to Maxine Greene, is not practiced in isolation, but is relational, and she termed this as relational aesthetics. In the traditional sense, art is often perceived, and at times constructed, as an insular process—the artist creates in the studio, the artwork is then exhibited in a public space, and viewers proceed to leave the space with their own experiences or aesthetic interactions (Bishop, 2004; Bourriaud, 2004; Guyote, 2018). On the other hand, relational aesthetics, according to Bourriaud (2004), takes place through an “encounter”, which is centered on a participatory perspective of art; it becomes what ignites the relationship between artist and audience through dialogue (p. 18). This points to how relational aesthetics explores various artistic practices as complex, layered, and crucial in creating a dialogic path that is situated in society, politics, the economy, and any other aspects one may encounter. Thus, this simple shift in perception positions art as a product that is never straightforward that it may not be further contemplated, nor isolated from its everyday surroundings (Kohli, 2016).

Artists and educators may find new and engaging ways to use social imagination as they create art. An example of this is a project I worked on with fellow colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University in 2016 when I was a Doctoral Candidate in the Art and Art Education Program; it was for a studio course called *Processes and Structures* taught by Dr. Mary Hafeli. The project considered wider social and environmental implications, and involved creating a collective art piece made out of recyclable material for an exhibition titled *An Inclusive World: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle... & the 4th R—Reimagine*. We decided, as a group of approximately 20 students, to use plastic bags to create an organic yet manmade work of art that is not only visual, but also tactile, and flexible. Over a number of classes, we discussed ideas, and worked together exploring techniques that would transform the plastic bags beyond their original manufactured shape. After many conversations and material explorations, we decided to stretch the bags, and paint them in various colors to emphasize this newly created rippled texture. Each one of us collected, stretched, and painted an uncountable amount of bags. We then decided we would create a flexible sculpture, and used wires to create a dome like frame, which was suspended from the ceiling. Carefully, we all worked together to attach the bags. Throughout the process, our studio turned into a space that generated dialogues about what we were creating and why.

The outcomes for collective projects can have wider implications; multiple individual experiences overlap or even intersect to contribute to fostering aesthetic experiences. The project also became a departure point that opened our eyes to the fact that a simple search for an idea, and the act of collecting and transforming an everyday object physically and visually led us to alternative ways of imagining a world that that could be constantly re-imagined (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An Inclusive World: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle... & the 4th R—Reimagine, 2016

3. Connecting Audiences and Art: Imagination and Aesthetic Experiences

An important matter that administrators and art educators need to consider is “not all young people will become artists, yet all are capable of constructing and expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings through and in response to visual images” (Burton, 2013, p. 47). Making art is one part of the educational experience, but there is also a collective aesthetic and sensory experience that occurs when individuals look at art, and discuss it as a group (Fenner, 2003). As Maxine Greene (2001) has explained,

Works of art do not necessarily nor automatically give rise to what we think of as aesthetic experience. Not only do we have to learn to attend, to lend our lives to the works before us; we must, as I have said repeatedly, learn how to notice what is to be noticed...how to respond to the qualities in particular works, how to engage as living, incomplete human beings in search of connection, in search of ourselves (p. 103).

Art educators should visit museums, art galleries, and artist studios with their students frequently with a certain goal or lesson plan in mind from the visit, and may also possibly involve parents in these trips.

Seeing objects and artworks in reality offers a different viewing experience than images. Through discussions about physical works of art, educators may offer students live examples of different artistic styles and themes of art making (Kovach, 1970). More importantly, the artworks students see in these spaces may have been made during different periods and places; this in itself creates opportunities for dialogues across different time periods (Burton, 2013).

Art educators should also develop skills, such as, “observing, examining, deducing, comparing, contrasting, relating structure to function”, in order to expand students’ “knowledge base by promoting research into the social, historical, economic, and technological contexts within which objects and artworks are found” (Burton, 2013, p. 131). Students need to understand how concepts have evolved over time, and the different ways in which art making has made its mark outside of educational institutions as a vehicle that represents heritage, change, progress, functionality, and society. It is important that activities held outside of the classroom find their way back into ongoing art projects, and future art lessons. The arts are an opportunity to express what we think, what we feel, and what we hope to make others see. As Greene (2001) states, “we are concerned with possibility, with opening windows and alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before” (p. 44). Contemporary art shows our fragile sides, things we want to change, what we want from the future and admire from the past, things that move us, and matters that bother us. It is part of humanity to want and need to express those things. But the issue is not only finding ways for people to see art, it is also about encouraging them to share what they actually perceive while viewing the works of art. In addition high school, college students, and their art educators may also benefit from artist visits in the classroom. These visits help students appreciate the arts more by learning about the diversity that exists in art making, approaches, skills, knowledge, and connecting to the artists through the lens of shared experiences and challenges in artistic processes; according to Burton (2013),

The professional artist can bring into the classroom the aura of the cultural context in which young people live their daily lives. Artists represent living traditions and can raise significant questions both about the past, the roots and traditions from which they spring, and about future practices and concerns. Artists can also raise questions about the relationship between the producers of art and the divergent movements, styles, and social institutions that have accommodated them (p. 132).

Young people will be shaping the world in the future, and to fully understand the diversity of cultures, and the contemporary world, it is essential that they understand how artistic traditions and legacies have emerged; “Artists not only bring culture into classrooms and studios in many, sometimes subtle ways, they also confront traditional notions of excellence by presenting the arts as contemporary, dynamic modes of creation” (Burton, 2013, p. 132). It is also important for art educators and their students to collaborate with artists, and learn new modes of thinking; this helps educators in their practice by acquiring new information, skills, media, and practices from an alternative point of view, and creates a sense of imagination to their own artistic practices. By interacting with art and artists,

educators and their students will start to feel a sense of belonging to a larger group who share similar circumstances; students may begin to understand that visual art made outside of educational institutions is not isolated and reserved for a particular group. Students may also be introduced to exemplary works of art; the advantage of this would be the opportunities for students to explore new imaginative perceptions in their own art making, and facilitating thoughtful engagement with works of art that evoke reflections (Burton, 2013). Giving students time to observe, reflect, and interpret their experiences will inspire their participation through imagination.

4. Dialogues in the Arts

In his book, *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Grant Kester sheds light on art practices, which he terms dialogic. According to Kester, dialogical art is grounded in an interconnected mode of meaning making and knowledge. Kester (2011) also explains it is important to practice connected knowing, which is different from the traditional modes of oppositional creation of meaning, which continues to influence art discourse. Open-ended conversations encourage a flexible sense of discovery (Locke, 2007). Art educators may focus students' responses to works of art through open-ended questions that focus on "evidence", "speculation", concepts, and "possibility", such as, what do you see in the artwork that makes you say that? What is the first thing that catches your eye in this image? What is the artist trying to communicate? How would you approach this idea/theme from your own point of view? What have you learned from looking at this image (Burton, 2013, p. 135). Art educators may think of other ways to focus their questions depending on the selected artwork, they may relate it to formal qualities, social or historical contexts, and personal experiences; what is most important is facilitating a dialogue that flows with ease; these dialogues may be utilized as introductions to art history, aesthetics, and thoughtful critiques of the images they see in popular culture (Burton, 2013; Lenehan, 2015). However, educators must understand that adopting the discovery approach also introduces an element of uncertainty in the process, which is fueled by the outcome of the discussion, and mainly focuses on different individual experiences that cannot be resolved into one perspective (Harris, 2008). The open-ended manner of inquiry is not meant to arrive at an ideal of universal representation of dialogue, but rather an approach that utilizes conversation to express one's own reality and comprehend the reality of others (Rorty, 1980).

5. Conclusion

Aesthetic pedagogy offers educators and students a sense of intellectual autonomy, and may also facilitate alternative ways of seeking and generating meaning. This process of learning to use social imagination as a way of seeing, is in itself a way to become flexible and more receptive to others and their experiences. It is not enough to philosophize or advocate for possibilities of change; educators must create opportunities for change through open-ended discussions and practices. It is important for

educators to explore all possible methods of approaching education, to practice, and to adopt flexible teaching methods that actively transform how students approach the process of learning.

References

- Bishop, C. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October*, 110, 51-79. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810>
- Bourriaud, N. (2004). Berlin letter about relational aesthetics. In C. Doherty (Ed.), *Contemporary art: From studio to situation* (pp. 43-49). London: Black Dog Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jae.2003.0003>
- Burton, J. M. (2013). *A Guide for Teaching and Learning in the Visual Arts*. New York, New York: Teachers College Columbia University.
- Fenner, D. E. W. (2003). Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Analysis. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 37(1), 40-53.
- Flannery, M. (1973). Aesthetic Education. *Art Education*, 26(5), 10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3191840>
- Greene, M. (1988). *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar: the Lincoln center institute lectures on aesthetic education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Greene, M. (2007). *Aesthetics as research*. <https://maxinegreene.org/library/maxine-greene-li-brary/works-by-maxine-greene/articles>
- Guyote, K. (2018). *Aesthetic Movements of a Social Imagination: Refusing Stasis and Educating Relationally/Critically/Responsibly*. 9.
- Joy, A., & Sherry, J. J. F. (2003). Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(2), 259-282. <https://doi.org/10.1086/376802>
- Kerdeman, D. (2005). Aesthetic Experience and Education: Themes and Questions. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39(2), 88-96. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jae.2005.0012>
- Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kester, G. H. (2011). *The one and the many: Contemporary collaborative art in a global context*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394037>
- Kohli, W. R. (2016). The Dialectical Imagination of Maxine Greene: Social Imagination as Critical Pedagogy. *Education and Culture*, 32, 15-24. <https://doi.org/10.5703/educationculture.32.1.15>
- Kovach, F. J. (1970). The Role of the Senses in Aesthetic Experience. *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 1(3), 91-102. <https://doi.org/10.5840/swjphil19701341>

- Lenehan, K. (2015). The Human Being as a Unity in Aesthetic Perception and Its Possible Meaning for Aesthetic Education in the Global Age. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 49(4), 55. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.49.4.0055>
- Locke, K. (2007). Rational control and irrational free-play: Dual-thinking modes as necessary tension in grounded theorizing. In A. Bryant, & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Steenberg, E. (2007). Visual Aesthetic Experience. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 41(2), 89-94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jae.2007.0018>
- Spector, H., Lake, R., & Kress, T. M. (2018). *Maxine Greene and the pedagogy of social imagination: An intellectual genealogy*. London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351014830>
- Uhrmacher, P. B. (2009). Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 39(5), 613-636. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00462.x>