

Education as Aesthetic Experience: "Art in Germ"

THOMAS BARONE

Despite many reasons to feel gloomy about the state of education in our society, my mood is one of optimism. Over the last few years I have observed in many teachers a proclivity to surmount the obstacles erected for them by technological, bureaucratic, often dehumanizing systems of schooling in order to engage in a kind of artistry. I have also seen student teachers, often under quite anaesthetic conditions, usher their students toward experiences that are analogous to those one has upon confronting a work of art.

Intriguingly, nearly all of this activity occurs apparently devoid of a clearly articulated awareness that artistry is indeed involved. That lack of awareness is, unfortunately, understandable. The dominance of the technological spirit in matters of schooling has, I believe, stunted the development and blunted the dissemination—or at least undermined the acceptance—of alternative conceptions of the educational process. One can only imagine how the shape of schooling in our society would be transformed if this tendency toward the aesthetic were, first, generally recognized as such, and then consistently and persistently cultivated. I suggest that such a cultivation could advance the cause of education by providing for our schools a greater vitality than exists at present. To that end, this essay is an exploration of a few of the ways in which teaching is analogous to other forms of art, and of some of the important aesthetic characteristics of the educational process. More specifically, I wish to focus primarily on one dimension of the teacher-as-artist metaphor, namely, certain similarities in the kinds of experiences promoted through good teaching and those encountered through good art.

I will immediately anchor this rather lofty topic to the ground with something concrete, a vignette of one particular classroom experience. It happened in Kentucky in 1979.

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Noting the similarities between growth-inducing educational experiences and emotionally meaningful aesthetic experiences can help us understand teaching as art.

A crowded classroom in an inner-city high school. I, as a university supervisor, am here to observe a student teacher in action. The students are in this American history class, but they are not students of American history. Instead, they play games. Several are skilled enough at the grading game that they feel it is worth playing. Many play their games inside their heads, and are less willing to pay with their attention. One or two students "play" only if guerrilla warfare can be called a game. American history ekes out a marginal existence on the outskirts of their lives.

What has promoted this alienation? Perhaps the regular teacher's "hidden" lessons about what constitutes the stuff of history—remote (but somehow great) men engaged in great (but somehow remote) events. Maybe it is the certainty that the time line of names, dates, and places will be recounted in a manner that never suggests the dramatic ebb and flow of past events. Or it could have been the staccato rhythm of the proceedings: silent reading of the text . . . stop . . . teacher-led interrogation about the facts . . . stop . . . recitation of more facts . . . dismissed.

But an amazing novice was about to change all that. Kurt was himself just waving good-bye to adolescence. At 21 or 22 his physical presence was unimposing, but a slight hearing impairment caused him to speak louder than necessary, and this volume added authority to a voice already deep and rich. Even so, his voice did not arouse the students—not until what Kurt was saying and how he was saying it became clearer.

He began with a verbal portrait of a distant landscape, comparing it with a more proximate one. Building upon the previous class's descriptions of American society at the turn of the 19th century, Kurt detailed the customs and lifestyles of the elite. Interesting comparisons and contrasts were then drawn with the *modus vivendi* of the local "upper crust," including present-day substitutes for the "code duello," a way of settling personal disputes by early American aristocrats.

Kurt placed some characters into this 19th century setting, and the colorful narrative built to descriptions of a duel between the former Secretary of the Treasury and the Vice President of the United States.

Kurt was aware that most students were abandoning their games for something more substantial. He saw it (as I did) in their faces, their posture, their remarks: each grasped Kurt's ideas and forged them into something individual and unique. We heard it in the questions they asked—the answers to which further established personal connections with the material.

Near the conclusion, questions increased into a full-fledged class discussion on the nature of personal honor, the costs of retribution, the notions of patriotism and treason, and the lives of high school students living in Kentucky in 1979.

The school bell rudely interjected itself

somewhere between point and counterpoint, and the large discussion parted into rivulets that flowed toward the door. The lively discussants—and one thoroughly amazed university supervisor—were there for all to see. As a gift from Kurt.

Educational Experience/Aesthetic Experience

This special moment in my professional life is recalled here for two reasons. First, because I believe that it exemplifies what John Dewey once called an "educational experience"—a growth-inducing experience that grants the capacity for having even richer experiences in the future (as opposed to miseducational experiences, which "have the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experiences").¹ Certainly the intellectual and emotional vibrancy in the experiences of Kurt's students would produce an enhanced capacity for interpreting human events and an increased willingness to continue the study of American history. The cultivation of truly educational experiences is, I contend, the most important mission of the teacher.

Second, this remarkable event illus-

trates what some philosophers—among them Dewey, the great 19th century German humanist Wilhelm Dilthey, and the aesthetician Monroe Beardsley—have described as an "aesthetic experience." This is an event distinguishable from the inchoate and formless general stream of our experience by several aesthetic characteristics including a unified structure among its elements. Examples of potentially aesthetic experiences include (from Dilthey) the process of having a child and the ensuing changes in the parents' lives, and (from Dewey and Beardsley) the experience one produces in communion with a personally meaningful work of art.

Is a classroom experience more likely to be intellectually and emotionally fruitful—more educative—if it is an aesthetic experience? I will argue the affirmative. Learning can occur otherwise, but a truly educational experience is likely to possess certain fundamentally aesthetic attributes. Among these attributes are an aesthetic dynamic form, buoyant emotional qualities, and a vital tension between the experiencer and the experienced.

Photo: Sister Megan Dull, SND



Dynamic Form

When having an aesthetic experience, said Dewey, a person feels a unified structure in the flow of life as one actively moves in an organized fashion from the initial acceptance of a challenge to a fulfilling denouement.² Such an experience is, for Dilthey, a coherently patterned "reaction of a whole self to a situation confronting it."³

This pattern or unified structure is the dynamic form of the experience. Indeed, like a play, or novel, or concerto, most aesthetic experiences proceed through several identifiable phases each with distinct emotional qualities—so do most educational experiences.

A sense of expectancy. At the beginning of both an aesthetic and an educational experience is the recognition of a dilemma, the discovery of a problem in whose solution one has an interest. The result is a degree of personal commitment to the experience that tends to move it forward. This commitment can take many forms, including the willingness of Kurt's otherwise distracted students to grapple with a lesson from history. The motivation for such an engagement springs from within the activity itself rather than from external sources. One is not compelled to listen to a lecture out of a desire for a passing grade, nor from the fear of failing an impending quiz. What moves one is in the thing itself: an undefined uneasiness striving to become articulate. This uneasiness, a sense of expectancy, even an air of suspense—these are the feelings that often accompany a commitment to explore an unfamiliar path. Indeed, the allure (at least partially) is in the vague direction and uncharted territory to be explored. Twists and turns await in the unknown, which, as in an overture, is only suggested; the end is *not* in sight.

This less-than-pleasant apprehension is the same sensation that accompanies the recognition of a problem in our daily living, or our first confrontation with a challenging work of art. It is a state to move *from* and is potentially frustrating when one cannot do so. If a student, for example, were asked to write a short story while lacking the rudimentary ability to compose a simple sentence, frustration and a negative dis-

"a truly educational experience is likely to possess certain fundamentally aesthetic attributes."

position toward writing would probably result.

But it is not a phase to be readily bypassed, as some educational strategies prescribe. The recommendation, for example, that performance objectives be shared with students in order to increase the acquisition of pre-specified learning outcomes has the potential of significantly distorting the dynamic form of a classroom experience. Attention is thereby pre-directed toward specific particles of information or skills rather than at the nexus of meaning that inhabits the activity. And as goes the experimental form, so goes the emotional tone. Now the path is straightened, one's destiny foretold, and so the mystery and suspense are dissolved and the impact of the learning very likely diminished. The use of objectives in this way is the educational equivalent to revealing the punch line before telling the joke. Deflating. Anaesthetic. And so, less likely educational.

A growing élan. The second phase of an aesthetic experience is a building phase and is characterized by movement toward a resolution. As mentioned, the precise resting place is not predetermined, but gradually emergent. Nevertheless, as Dilthey insisted, there is a teleological character to such experiences or, as Dewey put it, "a sense of growing meaning, conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process."⁴ Such meaning, however, is not derived solely from within the experience at hand. Objects and events in a new situation (inside a classroom or out) are always interpreted within a structured pattern of personal meaning accumulated

throughout one's life. For Dilthey, life itself is a whole structural system, an integral mass of accumulated experiences that allow for a meaningful interpretation of the data found in new experiences.

And the pieces of the new experience in turn contribute to the student's world view and affect his or her perceptions of future things and happenings. This process is observable in classrooms. Certainly as Kurt's story unfolded each new dab of information was colored by and, in turn, cast a slightly different hue on, what had been revealed previously. Both the creation and the experiencing of art is like this, too—as each component contributes to and derives meaning from an emerging "gestalt."⁵

A tired satisfaction. Finally, when the parts are nearly all in place—when, for example, the climax of the historical anecdote has been reached, one has arrived at the final phase of an aesthetic experience: a closure, a coming to rest. Often the emotional state accompanying this phase is a kind of wearied elation—a fatigue from the effort dominated by the fulfillment derived from a challenge surmounted. This exhilaration tinged with fatigue is often readily observable in those who have just completed an aesthetic experience: in the demeanor of patrons emerging from a Rodin exhibit, a film like *My Dinner with Andre*, or a triumphant staging of *Othello*. It was certainly evident in the comportment of Kurt's students as their experiences drew to a close.

One final point about the experiential form. From Dewey:

... In much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. There is no interest that controls attentive rejection or selection of what shall be organized into the developing experience. . . . There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and conclusions. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not an experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic.⁶

Most of the experiences fostered by Kurt's "cooperating teacher," unfortunately, fit this description well. And not only were those experiences anesthetic; they were also, I believe, miseduca-

tional, growth-inhibiting. The reason concerns the collateral emotional dimension of experience, and that introduces us to the second aesthetic characteristic of an educational experience, the organic relationship between its cognitive and affective elements.

Inherent Emotions

Emotions are inevitably associated with every object and idea in an experience. This is true even in enterprises generally considered "non-artistic," such as scientific research. This incidentally illustrates the fundamentally aesthetic nature of the work of both scientists and artists. Just as scientists do not think without feeling, and artists do not feel without thinking, so in every aesthetic experience there is both "emotionalized thinking and . . . feelings whose substance consists of appreciated meanings or ideas."⁷

It is true as well of those experiencing classroom events in which the aesthetic substance is knowledge of the "larger world," the content of the curriculum. Even though on occasion the emotional qualities in Kurt's class seemed almost spiritual, they were not disembodied feelings. Each existed in a singular context in conjunction with ideas, much as ideas and feelings coningle within the experiencing of a painting or a play. Moreover, the emotional qualities inherent in the event described earlier—a sense of expectancy, a growing élan, followed by a tired satisfaction—these propelled the experience forward, even allowed it to soar, and brought it to a propitious closure. Without them, it is likely that the dynamic form would have collapsed into the "stops and starts" of an anesthetic and miseducational experience—one cost of which can be an aversion toward future contact with similar content. Almost certainly the experience would have been drained of its vitality—the final aesthetic attribute of an educational experience, next to be considered.

Aesthetic Tension

In the traditional model of the teaching-learning process, the pupil is seen as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge. It is hardly novel to suggest that a more appropriate metaphor por-



Photo: Jan Sutherland Lane

trays the student as one who actively wrestles with the content of the curriculum, subdues it, shapes it, incorporates it into his or her being. This vital interaction between the experiencer and her "material" actually consists of a series of doings and undergoings—movements upon some aspect of the environment and resistances to be overcome. It is much the same as the aesthetic tension present between artists and their materials, and between a work of art and the experiencer.

The fact is most obvious in the laboratory or project mode of teaching, as a student, guided by the teacher, designs a science project, an essay, or a painting. But even the seemingly passive act of listening to a lecture can involve an active construing of meaning when, à la Kurt W., the information is selected, arranged, and presented in a manner that invites completion by the listener. The tussles with one's materials are present here also, for in this process the student does not merely recognize inert facts or truths, but is also stirred into the perception of relationships between an existing fund of ideas and new ones seeking a place. Dewey called such an act of perception "an act of reconstructive doing" wherein consciousness becomes fresh and alive. It is this freshness and vitality that lives at the heart of every aesthetic experience. Indeed, as Dewey insisted, "experience, in the degree to which it is experience, is heightened vitality . . . [and] because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievement in a world of things, it is art in germ."⁸

"Art in germ"—perhaps not "art" in any full-fledged theoretical sense, because many phenomena intrinsic to the fine arts are not to be found in the "art" of living. Nevertheless, certain qualities in the act of constructing or reconstructing (that is, perceiving) a work of art—the qualities discussed earlier—are the same qualities at the foundation of most educational experiences. It seems important, therefore, for educators to attend to the degree to which these qualities are present in classroom life and to consider how they can be fostered.

Teaching as Incipient Art

Which brings us to the act of teaching. Can it be an artistic activity? What are a few of its aesthetic dimensions? Educational experiences, we have argued, are the fruits of good teaching much as powerful art evokes an aesthetic response in the perceiver. But just what is it that a good teacher does in successfully promoting educational encounters?

Required first is (to a greater or lesser extent) an awareness of the accumulated interests, capabilities, and mind-sets of one's students. This requires a talent at empathic understanding—the talent that Kurt clearly demonstrated in his sensitivity to his students' interests and abilities. The perceptiveness needed for such empathy itself possesses aesthetic dimensions. A person grows in awareness of others much as he or she learns about himself or herself—through accumulating and assembling bits and pieces of behavior into a coherent pattern—then using that emerging pattern to interpret the meaning of new actions.

"And although educational experiences are ultimately shaped by the student, every teaching mode . . . properly involves some degree of guidance by the teacher."

Teachers constantly construct the life stories of their students by observing and interpreting behavioral cues and qualities in their comportment.

This is important information, a requisite for the next facet of the teaching process: the selection and arrangement of curriculum content into activities with a catalytic potential for engaging students in an educational experience. In this way the horizons of students are expanded as they are introduced to features of the larger world. And although educational experiences are ultimately shaped by the student, every teaching mode—inquiry, discovery, project, lecture—properly involves some degree of guidance by the teacher. Kurt provided a structure for his listeners as he carefully arranged and chaperoned the *rendezvous* between child and curriculum—listening; reading comportment and facial expressions; placing the world tantalizingly in view; shrewdly rendering the remote and difficult more accessible, inviting, mysterious, and challenging.

And all done in a *spontaneous* fashion? The spontaneity in teaching has been contrasted with the reflective "brooding" required of a poet or other artist.⁹ Indeed, the rapidly transpiring events in a classroom do often demand instantaneous responses. But far more often teachers express ordered ideas and feelings, which have acquired a tentative shape through practice in similar situations. Teaching at its best is not merely instinctive or habitual, but can be, I maintain, a true act of expression. It is such whenever teachers transform their behavior into a conscious means to an end, imbuing it with meaning. Dewey spoke of this kind of action as a medium: it becomes so "when it is employed in view of its place and role, in its relations, an inclusive situation—as tones become music when ordered in a melody."¹⁰

Finally, what about artistic control? Mustn't artists maintain control over their materials to achieve the desired result, while an educational experience ultimately is constructed not by the teacher, but by the student? Is it not, even with the guidance proffered by the teacher, finally the values and end-in-view of the student that prevail? Yes, there is a paradox here: a successful

teacher, such as Kurt, is one who, even within the lecture mode, designs situations that provoke others to exercise a kind of artistic control in carving out meaningful experiences.

But again, what if we emphasize the outcomes of the artistic process to be not static objects out "in the world" that impress themselves upon a beholder, but as opportunities for reconstructions of the "work" by the perceiver—transactions that are conditioned both by the character of the phenomena apprehended and the state of the perceiver? It is these transactions, these aesthetic experiences generated by artists through their work that are the important outcomes of the artistic process. Good teaching does something quite similar: it shapes the situations that can also yield aesthetic experiences. In that sense, therefore, teaching is incipient art.

This is, of course, not to deny the real distinctions between teaching and the artistic process. I will mention just one limitation of the analogy. The artist undertakes to transform a personal inner vision into an outward aesthetic form. Whether a particular audience is then able to partake of that vision depends in part upon their degree of aesthetic sophistication, their abilities to interpret and appreciate the arrangement of qualitative phenomena that comprise the work. The potential for profound aesthetic experiences can remain nascent in the work—hence, the works of great artists that break established boundaries of acceptability are often not appreciated by their creators' contemporaries. Great artists can be leaders without much concern for whether the troops are following. Good teachers, however, are afforded no such luxury. We have already cited the importance of empathy in the teaching process: teachers must be ever mindful of the experiential and developmental readiness of students in regard to particular content, and of the mode of presentation. *Hamlet* is great art, but to make it curricular content for eighth graders is not, *ipso facto*, good teaching. Indeed, the potential exists for gravely miseducational experiences when an overzealous English teacher assumes that the grandeur of Shakespeare can speak for itself to those who are not prepared to hear.

An Implication for Evaluating Teaching and Learning

What does all of this mean for teachers? In our technocratic society the ramifications of viewing teaching as incipient art are wide-ranging and profound. I will suggest only one first step: We need to devise and welcome new evaluation approaches that can reveal the qualities within educational experiences and the teaching process—approaches to augment the quantitative strategies and instruments that prevail.

Instead of dissecting the learning process into artificial domains, or particularizing the activities of teachers into discrete behaviors, the new qualitative approaches would portray teaching and learning in context. The character of the "process" would assume an importance equal to the features of the "products": no longer would "outcomes" be the primary or sole evaluative focus. The approaches would attempt to generate vicarious participation in classroom events by descriptively reconstructing them, and then interpreting the mean-

ing and evaluating the significance of those events for the educational lives of the protagonists. Such evaluation schemes have already been advanced; educational criticism, the use of "new journalism" strategies, and the autobiographical method each possess a capacity to reveal the character of educational events.¹¹ A wider acceptance could help sensitize educators and the general public to the qualities of life in our classrooms, and to the institutional constraints and other "frame factors" that discourage teachers from facilitating truly aesthetic and educational experiences.

Such awareness is needed because not every teacher is as talented as Kurt. The educational experiences promoted by Kurt possessed an organic structure with traits like dynamism, rhythmic continuity, and an inviolable unity—traits not only exhibited in works of art but also (as Suzanne Langer has pointed out¹²) present in our own physiological makeup. Hence my basic optimism: the seeds for the creation of profound aes-

thetic and educational experiences in the classroom are always there, even when dormant or struggling to germinate between the cracks in our concrete technocracies. What is needed is a dedicated cultivation of our teachers' latent talents for fostering educational experiences. Such an effort could, I believe, help to revitalize education in our society. □

¹¹John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 25.

¹²John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 35.

¹³H. A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).

¹⁴Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 39.

¹⁵These phases are most distinct in the confrontation of works in the performing arts, which are "played out," spatio-temporally. The phases are sometimes less obvious or not sequentially arranged when one experiences a painting or sculpture. An emotional "high" can sometimes be reached almost immediately, especially if one's level of connoisseurship is such that little or no analysis is needed to achieve appreciation of the "gestalt."

¹⁶Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 40.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹See: Maxine Greene, "Art, Technique, and the Indifferent Gods," in *Aesthetics and Problems of Education*, ed. Ralph A. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

²⁰Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 64.

²¹For a discussion of the rationale behind and some examples of educational criticism, see: Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1979). See also: Diane Kyle and Doreen Ross, eds., *Experiencing Classrooms: Examples and Issues of Educational Criticism* (in preparation).

Application of "literary non-fiction" strategies as discussed in: Thomas E. Barone, "Effectively Critiquing the Experienced Curriculum: Clues from the 'New Journalism,'" *Curriculum Inquiry* 10, 1 (1980): 29-53.

Examples of the autobiographical method are found in: William F. Pinar, "Currere: A Case Study" and Madeleine R. Grumet, "Songs and Situations: The Figure/Ground Relation in a Case Study of Currere," both in *Qualitative Evaluation: Concepts and Cases in Curriculum Criticism*, ed. George Willis (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1978).

²²Suzanne Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).

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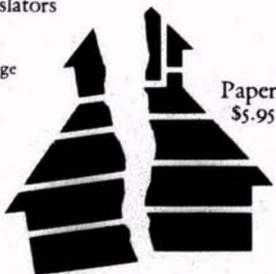
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