

# Aesthetics and learning

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## Abstract

*This paper is built on our book "Aesthetics and Learning", Hans Reitzels Publishers, Copenhagen 2010. In this book we describe the relationship between aesthetic creative activities and children's development and learning, based on among other the theories of Malcolm Ross (1988), Hansjörg Hohr (2000) and Bjørn Rasmussen (1998). According to these theories aesthetic activities are an integrated and irreplaceable part of all children's socialization. Essential activities that develops creativity and enables the child to use the aesthetic languages to reflect and communicate feelings, experiences and impressions, and develop understanding of herself, the others and the world she is a part of. "In order to grasp this potential, we need to deconstruct both the concepts of "Aesthetic" and "Education" to find new ways to organize what we shall label as cultural-aesthetic and playful education" (Rasmussen and Wright 2001).*

*We will in this paper, based on a modern aesthetic comprehension, present a theoretical background for using aesthetic learning processes as an integrated part of the curriculum.*

## Introduction

Throughout the pedagogical and didactic debate these days, you often come across the concept of aesthetics, expressed as the aesthetic dimension, aesthetic learning processes and aesthetic practice, for instance. When you examine these texts and statements closer, you may get the impression that aesthetics have developed into an extremely airy concept, a "hooray" word that covers anything tasteful, artistic, sensuous, harmonic, beautiful and experience-oriented. Obviously, such a wide aesthetics concept is difficult to use as anchoring of the pedagogical and didactic work associated with the art-based subjects in the education system. If the concept is to be meaningful and operational within this area, we therefore have to define it further. As a starting point we will problematize some common and widespread interpretations of aesthetics.

## Problematizations

The term aesthetics comes from Greek, *aistesis*, and can be translated with the words *sensation*, *sense* and *feeling*. This terminology forms the basis of a widespread interpretation of aesthetics as a type of recognition, 'sensory recognition', giving the senses a special physiologically based experience and recognition potential.

Next to this view of aesthetics flourishes a widespread and more culturally based interpretation based on the Antiquity's worship of beauty in the material world, as a reflection of or transcendence in relation to the underlying religious and societal cosmos. This spiritual or religious approach to the concept was anchored further through Romanticism's mysticism and nature religion and is still referred to as 'the school of beauty' today, as it appears in art and nature in particular.

Defining aesthetics solely as sensory recognition can be problematic in our opinion. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Daniel Stern have thus throughout the last century documented that all human recognition takes its starting point in the sensory motor co-ordination, where the child actively through motor function and senses explores and takes in the surrounding world. In the same way, modern philosophy, stated most clearly in phenomenology, has broken with the dualistic division into mind and body, and united them in an interpretation of sensory perception and recognition as closely connected.

However - if all our basic knowledge of the world is thus basically due to sensory experience and recognition processes, the consequence of an interpretation of aesthetics as sensory recognition would be that all knowledge is aesthetic. We do not find an interpretation of aesthetics that is so broad useful.

'The beautiful' is also problematic as a concept. In a late modern society, characterised by cultural liberation, where there is no consensus regarding the understanding of the beautiful, and where art itself has broken all limits regarding the classical concept of beauty, the definition of aesthetics as 'the school of the beautiful' also seems inadequate.

## **New reference points**

In our efforts to define an aesthetics concept that is not based on religion, special views on sensory perception and individual taste preferences, we turn towards the last two decades' suggestion for an interpretation of the art-based subjects as essential, inalienable learning and recognition paths, where their own work with aesthetic modes of expression provide the participants with the opportunity of not only developing professional skills, but also of acquiring a special sort of knowledge:

- *"The aesthetic recognition for creator and observer is characterised by the experience of understanding; an entirety of emotionality and rationality"* (Rasmussen 1990).
- *"Thus, aesthetics represent a qualitative world view, giving life meaning and entirety"* (Hansjörg Hohn 1998).

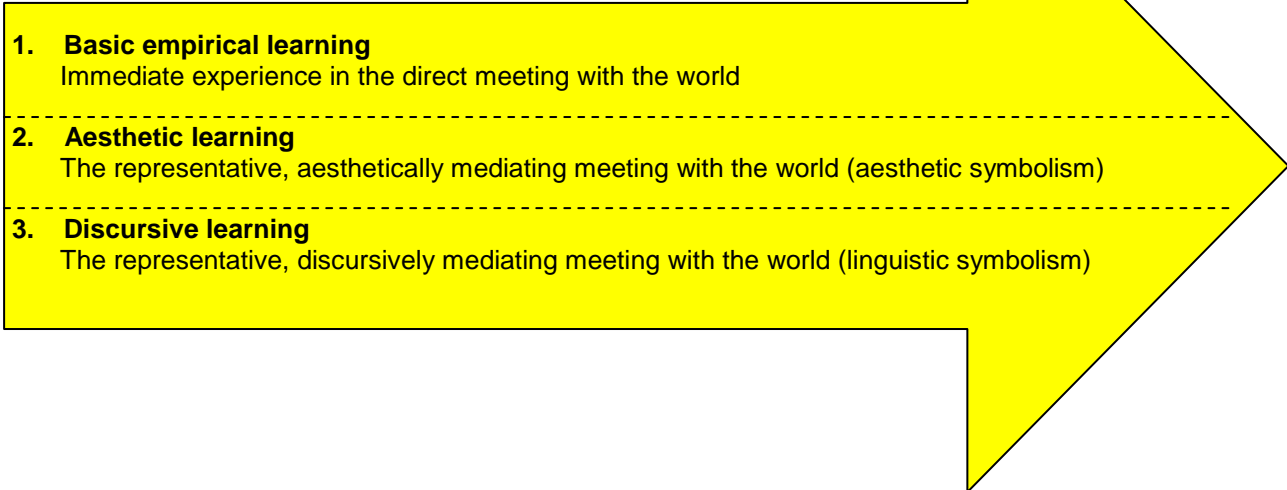
In this interpretation, the concept of aesthetics refers to the special symbolic language that we use when working with artistic forms of expression in a wide sense. Here, aesthetics are associated with the *symbolic form*, as it appears in role playing, rituals, everyday aesthetics and in the many types of art. This symbolic form has as its special characteristic that it is a man-made interpretation, with communication intent in view, that contains experiences and feelings, and has been created with a view of being experienced sensuously. In this interpretation, aesthetics as a whole can be defined in the following way:

**Aesthetics are a sensuous symbolic form that contains an interpretation of ourselves and the world and which is particularly capable of communicating from, to and about emotions.**

## **Aesthetics and epistemology**

According to Hohn (1998) man's socialization takes place in three interdependent forms of learning in a dialectical process between a society's culture on the one side and the active subject on the other side. With Hohn's theory as our reference point, we have developed the following epistemologist model.

### Three ways of learning

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- 1. Basic empirical learning**  
Immediate experience in the direct meeting with the world
  - 2. Aesthetic learning**  
The representative, aesthetically mediating meeting with the world (aesthetic symbolism)
  - 3. Discursive learning**  
The representative, discursively mediating meeting with the world (linguistic symbolism)

Even though an order of the learning methods above has been stated, this does not entail development-psychological phase thinking or a significance hierarchy. Each learning method has its own special and necessary function. The movement from basic empirical learning to discursive learning is a movement in the direction of emotional down toning, generalisation, objectivity and abstraction. In the following, we will examine these mutually dependent learning methods further.

1. *Basic empirical learning*, sensing and experiencing the world immediately, is man's first, basic and most comprehensive learning method. With regard to this learning method, the aim is to explore the world with your body and senses in a direct meeting with the world and gain a pre-symbolic mode of experience. The child feels and senses the world, i.e. it senses, perceives and acquires the surrounding offers and expectations, but it is not shaped passively, as the child from the first moment actively interacts with its surroundings.

In this experimental meeting with the world, the child will create an understanding, which according to Piaget's adaption concept is stored in experience structures in the brain. But this experience formation is not neutral, as man always associates an emotion with the sensed experience. (Bolton 1998)

What drives the process forward is the cultural interaction offers that the child meets on the one side and the child's instincts, needs and existential desire to excel in life on the other side.

**Development instinct** —————> **Basic empirical learning** <———— **Interaction offers**

2. *The aesthetic learning method* is a learning method that follows throughout our lives. It builds on the primary, empirical experiences, which it does not replace, though. The core of this learning method is that the child's pre-symbolic experiences link with the aesthetic form offers of the surrounding world in dialectic interaction, and that it acquires the world in this way through symbolic interaction. Thus, with regard to this learning method, the aim is to transform impressions into expressions through an aesthetic medium, and in this way get the opportunity to process experiences and communicate about you and your surrounding world at one and the same time.

Something special about this learning method is that it is *representative*, which means that it is characterised by the fact that you use symbolic expressions as representation for a perception, an experience, an emotion or an object. This can take place through art's many and versatile symbolic languages, but also through the aesthetic symbolism of everyday life, through which we express ourselves and our view of the world, for example through our choice of car, clothes etc.

The form activities that find their expression in aesthetic, symbolic mediation are characterised by relational complexity. The relational can for example be the theatre's many different effects (light, sound, make-up, bodily actions, linguistic actions, stage images etc.) working together in one expression, or music's many single notes that create processes and entireties in relation to each other. One note is not music, and a solitary smoke machine does not create theatre. The single components do not generate meaning, and therefore, they cannot be 'translated' into other expressions in the same way as words can be translated into other words. The same form symbol can enter into very different expressions where the symbolic expression arises through the relational complexity of the single components. Thus, aesthetic activity is primarily holistic.

According to Hohr, a special significant feature of the aesthetic activity is that you can use it to express *the unspeakable*. The unspeakable can be thoughts and knowledge that you are not capable of putting into words and thus capture in discursive language. This primarily includes the subjective, emotions and sensory experiences that to the subject itself appear silent, unclear and fragmented, and topics such as hate or love, whose complexity and emotional meaning can only be captured roughly and insufficiently in discursive phrasing. Through the aesthetic mediation of the unspeakable, we thus become able to reflect on and communicate about the things we would not otherwise be able to speak of.

Thus, aesthetic activity can include a number of special recognition-related potentials. First of all, the actual creating activity where you transform impressions of the world into sensuous symbolic form includes a reflection process that makes it possible for us to process our experiences and communicate about the complex as well as the unspeakable. Secondly throughout the process and in connection with the continuous communication, you will through the form be able to mirror yourself and your understanding of the world partly in the societally defined cultural forms and partly in co-actors' aesthetic expressions and finally in the response you get from your surroundings to your aesthetic expressions. In this way, the aesthetic learning method gives us a completely necessary and irreplaceable approach to the world.

The aesthetic learning method takes place in a span between basic empirical learning on the one side and the aesthetic form and mediation offers that the child meets on the other side:

**Basic empirical learning** —————> **Aesthetic learning** <———— **Aesthetic form offers**

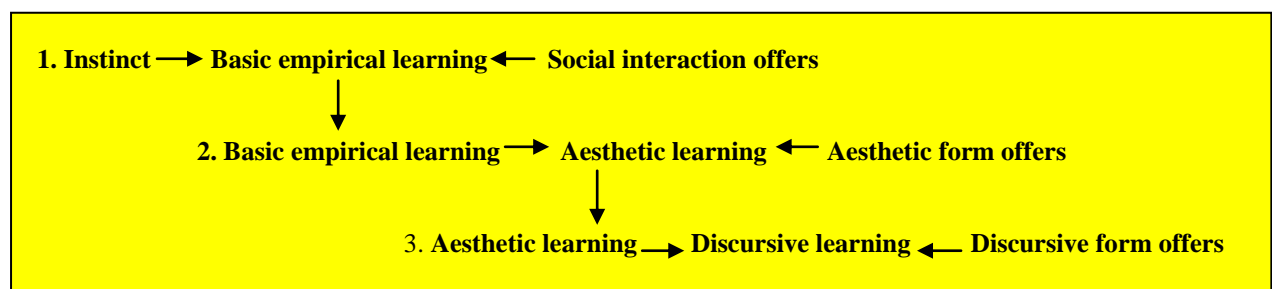
3. *Discursive learning* builds on basic empirical learning and aesthetic learning, yet without replacing them. This type of experience is a conscious process that first deconstructs and then reconstructs the world at an abstract level and manifests itself as a conceptual framework. The discursive is a term borrowed from linguistic philosophy (Langer 1969). It describes a language that forms expressions about the world, expressions characterised by causal relation, logic and chronology with a specific field

or domain. The discursive learning method is developed as the child gradually associates its experiences and emotions with the conventional abstract meanings of the linguistic system. Contrary to the aesthetic form systems, linguistic symbols are relatively stable in their meaning, relatively independent of context and lexical. The latter means that a word can be fully or partially explained and defined using other words. That they are independent of context means that a letter, a number or a note always refers to the same unit, regardless of the context it enters into. 2 + 2 is always 4, no matter if it refers to time or thermos bottles.

The discursive learning method takes place in a span between aesthetic learning on the one side and the discursive form and interaction offers that the child meets on the other side:



### Complete model of socialisation and learning, based on Hansjörg Hohr:



Finally, we would like to sum up with this definition of an aesthetic learning process:

**An aesthetic learning process is a learning method where you transform your impressions of the world into aesthetic form expressions through aesthetic mediation in order to be able to reflect on and communicate about yourself and the world.**

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