Aesthetic Dimensions of Education: Exploring a Philosophical Pedagogy Using Dialogue with Arts Learners and Educators

Abstract
This thesis makes the claim that aesthetic experience is of fundamental significance in how we learn. Two basic questions are thus explored: 1) what is the meaning of aesthetic experience in educational contexts? and 2) how do arts learners and educators conceptualize and understand aesthetic experience in relation to their own sense of artistic learning? Though the questions are posed separately and may be seen as distinct orientations within theory and practice respectively, for the thesis they are used to inform interdependent explorations of how aesthetic experience connects with how we learn. The thesis begins with an introduction and review of literature examining theoretical connections between aesthetic experience and education. This is followed by a description of an educational program called Exploring Aesthetic Experience. The program was developed using a dialogical approach with the aim of helping students a) probe the significance of different philosophical quotations on aesthetic experience to deepen their understanding, and b) make meaningful connections with their own artistic learning. The program was implemented with 10 senior secondary students attending a fine arts school, and separately with 16 educators completing a master’s degree in arts education. A qualitative study involving interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore the dialogical encounters of arts learners and educators during the program and the concepts of aesthetic experience and connections with artistic learning that emerged. The findings demonstrate how learners and educators were able to engage in deep and meaningful reflections on their own aesthetic experiences through dialogue, thus providing both a conceptual exploration of aesthetic experience and a philosophical-pedagogical exploration of the learning process (or of ‘engaged learning’). Three main discoveries emerged. First, these arts learners and educators, who presumably are immersed in aesthetic and artistic experience, had little initial understanding of what aesthetic experience is or how to conceive of it. Second, conceptions of aesthetic experience that gradually emerged from participants corresponded closely both to their own descriptions and to educational theorists’ conceptions of genuinely engaged learning. Third, the learning process of the educators was startlingly resistant and ‘conceptual’ compared to the
younger learners, pointing towards the possibility of some important implications about the status quo patterns of our learning in higher education and the need for further study of aesthetic dimensions of education.