

# Aesthetic Education

## The Division of Arts, Health and Society

Stephen K. Levine

What is distinctive about teaching and learning in the expressive arts programs at EGS is our emphasis on aesthetic education: learning through the arts. In most universities, the arts are separated from other disciplines. Professional training in the arts takes place in fine arts faculties, which the majority of students visit only through the occasional elective course. This separation reflects the traditional distinction between *theoria* and *poiesis*, theoretical and artistic ways of knowing. The arts are thought to be non-cognitive; at best, they employ a kind of technical and situational know-how, completely different from the scientific understanding that offers us an objective view of the world. Even Humanities departments, which concern themselves with the study of cultural works, do not usually use the arts themselves as a means of learning.

This radical distinction between science and art is itself an historical one. It was not until the beginnings of philosophy in classical Greece that the traditional mythopoetic transmission of knowledge was rejected in favor of a concept of reason grounded in the logic of non-contradiction. In this way, *mythos* gradually gave ground to *logos*: poetry, drama and storytelling were replaced by rigorous thought. Ultimately, for Plato, the poets were to be exiled from the just city, since their work was thought to give rise to disorder and chaos in the soul

and consequently in the body-politic. This Platonic conception of the deleterious effects of *poiesis* is clearly in contrast with the honored place that Greek tragedy traditionally held in the city-state.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller challenged this exclusion of the arts from the realm of knowledge. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, Schiller set forth the view that human existence had become split between the body and the mind, sensibility and understanding. He saw aesthetics as a way of overcoming this fragmentation. The embodying of meaning in art, as well as the harmony of form in great works, gives us a presentiment of our own possible wholeness. Far from being irrelevant to education, aesthetics was now seen as what we might call the royal road to learning, unifying the different faculties of the mind and, potentially, the different strata of society.

Schiller was following Kant in the conception of aesthetics that had been developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this tradition, "aesthetics" refers to the study of the experience of works of art, the subjective states of mind that are produced by contemplation of such works. Schiller, in spite of being himself a great poet and dramatist, kept to this contemplative tradition. It is true that Schiller, following Kant, emphasized play as a means of bridging reason and sense-experience. Nevertheless aesthetic education for him comes primarily from the contemplation of the works produced by play and not from play itself, despite its poietic nature.

Moreover, *poiesis*, the making of works, was thought to be the realm of genius. It is *aesthesis*, the experience of these works through contemplation available to all, that is the means of leading the mind to that wholeness which had been torn apart through the development of a scientific rationality divorced from sensible experience.

The use of the expressive arts at EGS is a restoration of the central role of *poiesis* as a

way of knowing. Students are encouraged to engage in art-making not as an illustration of a theoretical framework but as a way of discovering what had been previously unknown. This emphasis on *poiesis* as discovery accords with our understanding of its role in change-processes, whether in therapy, education, coaching, or conflict-transformation and peacebuilding. In order for individuals and groups to move from a restricted situation to one in which their range of play is enlarged, it is necessary for the imagination to be put into action. The arts are disciplines of the imagination; they take us beyond the actual into the realm of possibility. By decentering from the literal reality of our lives, we can engage a practice of the imagination that opens up new horizons and draws on resources that may have previously lain dormant. Furthermore, through reflective analysis on this process in a phenomenological mode, we can see possibilities for change that had been previously covered up.

Thus not only is *poiesis* or art-making restored to its central role in knowing, but *aesthesis* or contemplative understanding is also given an important, though secondary, role in the learning process. It is not enough to engage in art-making; afterwards we must step back and reflect on its significance. We call this mode of reflection “aesthetic analysis” to indicate that it is not an interpretation based on an explanatory framework but rather a phenomenological process of understanding in which we allow what shows itself to show itself without imposing meaning upon it.

This understanding of *poiesis* as the path to aesthetic education relies on the conception of art-making as central to human experience, not restricted to genius or to professional artists. By engaging in poietic acts, students discover their own resources for imaginative expression and thereby the possibility of helping others to do the same. Our conception of aesthetic education also challenges the notion that the knowledge which the arts bring is primarily a matter of subjective experience; rather, the practice of the imagination can lead to the discovery of the truth of the situation in which we find ourselves.

*Poiesis* opens up the possibility of something new, and in doing so, enables us to under-

stand the past in a new light. As resources are uncovered, individuals and communities can develop a sense of possible action, ways of transforming themselves and their worlds. In this sense we follow Schiller's conception of aesthetic education as a possible basis for the development of the individual and as an aid in helping to heal the fragmentation which is often experienced in contemporary life.

However, the goal of wholeness which guides Schiller's thinking can no longer serve as an unquestioned ideal for us. From the totalitarianism of the last century to the "war on terror" today, the search for unity can often become a means for repressing difference. Any movement toward integration and wholeness must also contain within it a tendency toward greater pluralism, multiplicity and differentiation.

Perhaps the concept of aesthetic education itself has to be deconstructed to allow for the beauty of the various. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "Glory be to God for dappled things... All things counter, original, spare, strange..." At EGS, we glory in the dappled things in all their beautiful variation, whether they be the mountain flowers of Saas Fee or the flowering of students as they grow and learn. As Paolo Knill often says, "Beauty is the we song of flowers." *Poiesis* is our way to that song.



**Stephen K. Levine** is Dean of the Doctoral Program in Expressive Arts and holds the Paul Celan Chair of Philosophy and Poietics at EGS. He is a Professor Emeritus at York University and Co-Director of the CREATE Institute (Centre for Expressive Arts Therapy Education) in Toronto. He is the author of several books in the field of expressive arts, including *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* and *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering*, co-author of *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy: Toward a Therapeutic Aesthetics* and co-editor of *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives* and *Art in Action: Expressive Arts Therapy and Social Change*.