



Aesthetic Responsibility in Expressive Arts

Thoughts on Beauty, Responsibility
and the New in the Education
of Expressive Arts Professionals

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*The work of art gives daily life its dream—
transcending our time-bound constraints.*

In the art- and studio-based learning frames essential in the training for expressive arts professionals in the Arts, Health and Society Division of EGS, students are challenged aesthetically both in studios and in seminars. Our students—artists and non-artists alike—are engaged in different roles in artistic activities and reflective discourse; but directly or indirectly, the curriculum at EGS must have a strong aesthetic component.

Questions about aesthetics and responsibility arise in respect to the arts in education. Aesthetic education, as we practice it, emphasizes a different kind of responsibility than we usually encounter in life, one that is respectful of and to the arts, namely an *aesthetic responsibility* (Knill et al, *Principles and Practices of Expressive Arts Therapy* 2005). The dilemma is that although we may be responsible for providing frames that encourage the emergence of the new, we cannot trick beauty into shining through; the work of art emerges in its own time. Yet we still want the sensory experience of beauty to arrive in order to help us make sense.

In this respect, certain questions arise:

How can we avoid forcing the artwork to a specific educational purpose?

How can we stick to the arts and go beyond pedagogical creativity exercises?

How can we set the challenge of an aesthetic learning frame quite right: not too low nor too high?

Teaching with aesthetic responsibility has to do with setting up challenging tasks. If we did not do that, the students would not have a sense of achievement that moves, touches and amazes—some of the attributes of beauty. The teacher needs to be able to confront; not everything goes. There is thus a responsibility to suggest the quite right challenge to help the student make the artwork “work.”

The teacher therefore proposes a task that the learner is challenged by yet is able to cope with. This is where aesthetic responsibility focuses on the principle of *low skill–high sensitivity* (Knill 2004). We choose an art form or style that demands high sensory competency for the shaping of the artwork and an adequate level of manual skills so that even a non-professional

artist can experience the process of artmaking. For instance, making a collage demands high sensitivity to images and the skill to cut with scissors. It does not necessarily require training in an art academy.

The teacher's coaching lies in the interest of helping the emerging work of art to find its beauty. She guides the student to that very moment where it "works." And as the process continues, the more an atmosphere of longing for the work of art begins to arrive. This longing should not be confused with a goal-directed orientation. It is much more process-oriented, raising curiosity and grounding each shaping action in the present yet completely directed forward into the future.

Of course, we cannot prepare the student completely for the future. We cannot conquer the unpredictable scenes that will arise, nor simulate and role-play the unknown. However in staying with the arts, we learn how something new is created and comes into our world. This fosters an atmosphere in which the unknown can be encountered more as an opportunity than as a threat.



To make this possible, the teacher needs to be skillful and artful in paying attention to the intrinsic forward movement that occurs when working with the arts. The artistic process needs to be attractive and nurturing so that it helps the student overcome fears of failure. The newness and strangeness of the artwork then becomes a resource that keeps both the teacher and students curious. Motivation through curiosity must be cultivated for everyone engaged in the learning process—teacher and students alike. We want to learn what the work of art—still unknown to us—may be,

and what it may have to tell us.

To learn actually requires an encounter with something unknown to us. Working with the arts is in that sense a gift to any classroom, since the material to learn from is always new, as if it were just being created in that moment. Being a change agent constantly puts us into new and unexpected situations, just as working with the arts teaches us to live with the new and unexpected. Any change—wanted or unwanted—in educational, consulting or therapeutic contexts requires shape-shifting anew.

This kind of lived-through learning touches on existential issues and is not a “may be” nor an “as if.” Therefore we as teachers are responsible to give directions that are congruent with the art-based learning process. These directions guide the process in the tradition of the arts with clarity about the frame and the play-range of shaping. This commitment to the arts is an educational purpose unto itself.

Even though we cannot know the outcome of an artistic process, we can always rely on its unique newness and freshness. Validating this as a good-enough learning base frees us from searching for imposed securities such as pedagogical creativity exercises or games that would limit our capacity to encounter the unknown.

The arts speak without speaking—revealing and concealing, crisscrossing the tangible and the intangible, allowing our minds and senses to be here while there, and encouraging us to give the inconceivable a chance.





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