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Editorial: Adult Education and the Aesthetic Experience

Danny Wildemeersch

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Aesthetics: a broad understanding

Over the last years the interest in the relationship between education and aesthetics has remarkably increased, both in theory and in practice. One could even argue that to a certain extent there is an ‘aesthetic turn’ in the way educational practices are conceived. In connection with this increased attention, the editors of RELA want to stimulate the reflection and dialogue on how aesthetics plays a role both in theory and in practices of adult education and learning. The concept of aesthetics is often connected with art practices. We are interested in that particular orientation. However, we choose to conceive of aesthetics in a broader sense. We are thereby inspired by Nikolas Kompridis (2014, p. XVI) for whom “aesthetic” or “aesthetics” is ‘much more than a specialized inquiry into the nature of art, artworks or beauty, grounded in a sensuous, usually non-cognitive, mode of perception’. Aesthetic(s) in his view is something much wider in scope: ‘it is about what we are able to see and hear and what we are unable to see and hear’ (ibid. p. XVIII). This approach is very much inspired by Jacques Rancière who understands aesthetics as

the distribution of the sensible’. To him, aesthetics refers to the ‘order of the sensible’, which is about the ‘specific distribution of space and time, of the visible and the invisible, that create specific forms of “commonsense”, regardless of the specific message such-and-such an act intends.’ (Rancière, 2010, p. 141)

Hence, in this view, politics, as well as education and arts are aesthetic because they relate to (the questioning of) the order of ‘what makes sense’. And therefore, changes in aesthetic regimes often are signals or symptoms of changes in the way we understand the social, cultural and political order (see also: Sitzia, 2018).

In a more concrete way, Paul Mecheril (2015) argues that ‘cultural-aesthetic education’ (kulturell-ästhetische Bildung) can neither be restricted to the knowledge of artworks, concerts and theatre plays, nor to the qualities of perception capacities. It rather relates to the processes through which aesthetic experiences are connected with overall conditions in which we live, including the question what is valuable to strive for. Another source of inspiration of such broad approach to aesthetics is John Dewey who, when researching the meaning of art in human



action, emphasizes not so much the outcome of artistic practices, but rather stresses the broad sensorial experiences that captivate the attention of human beings.

In order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with the raw: in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd – the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth, the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. (Dewey, 1934, p. 4-5)

Approaches to aesthetics in (adult) education

We see these broad ways of understanding ‘aesthetics’ also reflected in recent work on education in general and adult education in particular. Various authors signal the limitations of a cognitivist understanding of educational practices. They claim that education and learning indeed include all senses such as seeing, feeling, tasting and touching, rather than just thinking, memorizing and understanding. Therefore, one could claim that education and learning are *bodily* experiences. For Gert Biesta¹ (2017), education is the work of the head, of the hands and of the heart. It is about the way we engage in and with the world with all our senses. In a similar way, Richard Siegesmund (2013, p. 303) conceives of aesthetic education as a playful activity, ‘an open and fluid imagining with delight as a possible outcome but can never be a goal’. Hence, such activity is purposeless. In the same vein, Gayatri Spivak (2012) emphasizes that aesthetics is ‘a curriculum of ab-use’; or an activity that is deviant to utility.

Other authors, particularly the ones that relate to adult education emphasize the critical function of aesthetic education. Anne Harris (2014) analyses how economy and industry nowadays instrumentalize creativity in view of increased profit-making. In response, she develops an argument for a new ‘aesthetic imaginery’ in diverse educational contexts and art practices. Such imaginery is the result of slowing down the educational process. ‘Slowing down doesn’t in itself promise a better kind of education, or an increased opportunity for creative exploration and productive risk-taking, but it sets the condition for doing so’ (Harris, 2014, p. 71). Other authors, like Jane McDonnell (2014) search to re-imagine the significance of art in the relationship between democracy and education. Still other authors like Ana Zarrelli and Elizabeth Tisdell (2016) conceive of aesthetic education as a tool to represent the ethical dimension in critical public pedagogy.

Concrete art experiences in adult education

In line with these varied orientations vis-à-vis aesthetics in general and aesthetics in adult education, there are also concrete art experiences worth being presented and analyzed. Artistic practices have long been popular in diverse forms of adult education. Raymond Williams (1989) has long been a concrete source of inspiration to aesthetic approaches in adult workers’ education in the UK. Other orientations relate to the use of arts in literacy education. Paulo Freire (1972) was one of the first researchers in that field to experiment with images and drawings to support processes of ‘reading the word and the world’ with landworkers in Latin-America. Still today similar approaches are practiced in a wide variety of educational initiatives. In line with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal developed his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1975). There are many indications that his methods are still very much alive in adult education today. Also in community arts a broad mixture of aesthetic approaches are in use,

such as theatre workshops, community walks, street art, neighbourhood walking and mapping, but increasingly also the use of social media and practices of blogging (Gouthro, 2018; Right, 2018; Wildemeersch & Von Kotze, 2014). Also museum education is increasingly moving beyond traditional methods such as guided tours by arts experts (Clover, Sanford & Johnson, 2018). Furthermore peace education makes use of mixed media (Medosch, Vater & Zwerger, 2014). And even in vocational education and training there are initiatives that introduce creative and expressive methods, other than the traditional ways to transfer knowledge and skills (Bennett, Reid & Petocz, 2014; Tamboukou, 2017).

We have invited authors to contribute to this thematic issue on 'adult education and the aesthetic experience' with both theoretical and/or empirical contributions that refer to the above-mentioned variety of approaches regarding aesthetic experiences in adult education and learning. The general research question that guided this inquiry was the following: *How can the aesthetic experiences inspire adult education theory and practice?*

Several contributors have responded to our invitation. We have selected five papers that fit well into the concept of this thematic issue.

Contributions

The first paper is by the Italian trio Laura Formenti, Silvia Luraschi and Gaia del Negro. The title is 'Relational Aesthetics: a duoethnographic research on feminism'. In their contribution the authors reflect on the role of aesthetics in the development of a critical pedagogy for social justice in adult education. In their view, critical thinking and awareness are the result of relational and political processes. In the paper they investigate the responses by the three researchers to a photographic exhibition representing women in their everyday lives. The reflection comes about in a dialogic exploration of feminism in the authors' lives, triggered by the pictures in the exhibition. It results into a theoretical exploration of feminism, identity and education.

The second contribution named 'The feminist museum hack as an aesthetic practice of possibility', is by Darlene E. Clover and Sarah Williamson. The Canadian and British authors investigate how art in museums represents the traditional male dominance in wider society. The research is inspired by four 'hacks' by students in an ethnographic museum in Canada and an art gallery in England. The hacks are interventions whereby the students, with post-its, draw attention to the male bias in the representations. The collective reflection among the students is an exercise in making visible what remains hidden and stimulates self and social critique among the participants. The paper is both the report on the systematic investigation of aesthetic experiences and a contribution to the struggle for gender justice and change.

The third paper by Alexis Kokkos from Greece is titled 'The process of transformation: Kegan's view through the lens of a film by Wim Wenders'. The author departs from Kegan's constructive-developmental theory, explaining the evolution of human being's consciousness in terms of developmental stages. The theory is also interlinked with Mezirow's theory of Perspective Transformation. On the basis of this theoretical framework, Kokkos draws insights from Wim Wenders' film 'Alice in the Cities' to explore important questions about consciousness development, e.g. whether it is a linear or a spiral process; or about the conditions of moving from one stage to another, and about the role of adult educators in fostering this consciousness development.

In the fourth paper, Astrid von Kotze from South-Africa, describes and analyses a practice of political and art education with working class women in her home country. The title of the paper is 'Making Beauty Necessary and Necessary Beautiful'. The article shows how the participants, through collective experiences, achieved a sense of catharsis that opened

perspectives to alternative ways of living and working. It draws on theory developed in practice by workers in the nineteen-eighties when they asserted their dignity and humanity as creative subjects and demonstrates how the women, some twenty-five years later, articulate a similar defiance. The article suggests that certain preconditions must be met before the process of conscientisation through creative work can achieve its objective of preparing participants for action: repoliticise art and education by building radically horizontal relationships; create a playful third space for experimentation and generating knowledge, and encourage improvisations that allow contradictions to emerge and be examined critically.

The fifth and final paper is by the Canadian scholar René Susa. It is a theoretical contribution titled 'Struggling with the recurring reduction of being to knowing: placing thin hope in aesthetic interventions'. The article problematizes the way we, modern subjects, currently exist in the world. It suggests that the common way in which we imagine solutions to our problems, is the very way, through which these problems are being created in the first place. The text pays particular attention to two problematic constitutive characteristics of the modern/Cartesian subject. First is the reductivist insistence on having our "being reduced to knowing" that results in having our relationship to the world mediated (exclusively) through knowledge. Second is our insistence on being able to see/sense/experience ourselves only as separate, presumably autonomous, individuals that ultimately ends up producing us as such. As such it is a plea to pay attention in adult education practices to consider the aesthetic experience as an intersubjective experience including all our senses rather than just a cognitive experience.

Notes

¹ Biesta speaks of 'citizenship as outcome', rather than of 'citizenship as status', whereby outcome refers to the result of an educational trajectory.

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