

ARTICLE

AESTHETIC, SPIRITUAL, AND FLOW
EXPERIENCES: CONTRASTS AND
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to cross-examine Dewey's ideas on religious and aesthetic experiences, and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow experience. To achieve this end, we offer an analytic framework for evaluating experiences: triggers, characterizations, and import. In using this framework, we not only more deeply examine these ideas of experience, but we also discuss what educators may learn from the intersection of these three important theories of experience.

INTRODUCTION

The idea for our paper began with a practical problem. As curricularists dedicated to an aesthetic approach to teaching, curriculum, and learning, we regularly provide workshops on this topic for teachers in K-12 schools. Our own work is based on Dewey's aesthetic ideas¹ and we have developed a theory called CRISPA² that teachers may employ to create what we might call "wow" experiences in their own classrooms.³ That is, they can set up the conditions for students to have aesthetic experiences with the material they are learning. When conducting such workshops for teachers, we often hear the observation, "This is like flow," or we get the question, "How is this different from a spiritual experience?"

Thus, this exploratory manuscript began with the purpose of trying to understand the three kinds of experiences—flow, aesthetic, and religious—so that we would have adequate answers to the teachers' questions. As we delved into Dewey's notions of aesthetic and religious experiences and Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on flow, we not only gained some insight into how the three kinds of experiences differed, but we also came to a new realization—all three types of experiences would benefit teachers and students. The focus of the paper is to demonstrate why this is the case and how we might begin to achieve such ends across pre-kindergarten to higher education.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

There are scores of books and articles on Dewey's aesthetics and on his ideas about religious experience. There are also texts that examine aesthetic experiences in relation to flow. The following, while not comprehensive, does provide a general overview of the literature.

A number of texts look at Dewey's aesthetic ideas and their implications for education,⁴ as well as other areas of experience such as communication.⁵ Similarly, many expound upon Dewey's ideas on moral knowledge and education,⁶ which are not to be confused with Dewey's ideas on religion and education, for which there is a separate body of literature.⁷ Note, too, that some texts examine Dewey's ideas on religion for religious education.⁸

Some texts provide a full rendering of Dewey's ideas on aesthetics and religion independently,⁹ while others discuss the spiritual in the aesthetic.¹⁰ That is, there are spiritual qualities in aesthetic experience and there are aesthetic qualities in religious experience.¹¹ In addition, some authors focus on Dewey's discussion of the holistic aspects of experience, thereby noting that the spiritual is always somewhat present, but in the final analysis, these texts focus on topics such as religion and democracy¹² or religion and nature,¹³ and not religion and aesthetics. Another topic of some volumes relate Dewey's spiritual ideas to Eastern religions, thereby drawing out other types of cultural or experiential implications.¹⁴

Csikszentmihalyi introduces his ideas about experience in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*,¹⁵ a work that examines a kind of optimal experience in which the individual enjoys total involvement. Several works have built upon Csikszentmihalyi's original work to examine flow experiences in business,¹⁶ in everyday life,¹⁷ in education,¹⁸ in creativity,¹⁹ and in athletics.²⁰ Augustine and Zoss²¹ combine flow experience and aesthetic experience in looking at teacher preparation. They describe the aesthetic flow experience as "having qualities of flow, pause, emotional intensity, and meaningful relationships."²² Further, some work explores the relationship of flow experience in religion.²³ However, flow, aesthetic experience, and religious experience have not been examined together, nor with the aim of improving teaching and learning.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

As indicated above, in this paper we compare and contrast three big ideas: Dewey's notions of aesthetic and religious experiences as well as Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on flow, or optimal experience. To acquire this understanding, we focused largely on four texts. We utilize Dewey's *Art as Experience* because we use this book as a key text in teacher workshops, and because we believe it captures most succinctly his ideas about aesthetic experience (Dewey discusses aesthetics in other texts, but we believe, along with Philip Jackson²⁴ and Elliot Eisner, that this one is central).²⁵

We also look to Dewey's *A Common Faith* to explain religious experience, and we supplement this section with a few secondary sources to elaborate on areas upon which he does not expand. We stay with his terminology, though some contemporary readers may think of his "religious" experience as "spiritual" experience. Finally, we examine Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*,²⁶ and to a lesser extent *Finding Flow: the Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*,²⁷ as they are the foundational texts in which he presents the rationale for such experiences and the related processes.

In order to meaningfully compare and contrast the texts with the aim of educational enhancement, we focus on three aspects of these experiences. Since we were interested in the differences among the experiences as felt by the individuals undergoing them, and because we had a particular interest in their educational import and implementation, we explored how one initially engages in such experiences; how the experiences are characterized; and why the experiences matter.

Thus, we compare and contrast the triggers, characterizations, and import of the three types of experiences. Dewey used the word "impulsion"²⁸ to refer to an individual moving forward in life, with mind and body, and, as such, it can be seen as an entryway for a person into a type of experience. We have Dewey's idea in mind, but we use the more colloquial word, "trigger," to refer to ideas focused on the question: what gets an individual into aesthetic, religious, or flow experiences? By "characterizations," we refer to how the person undergoing one of these three experiences would describe it. What would he or she say while engaged in the experience? With "import," we consider the perceived value of the experience for the actor(s), as well as any potential added benefits. In other words, what was the upshot of the experience for the participant?

Definitional Clarity

Readers familiar with Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's book, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*, may note that in their introduction the authors compare flow experience with aesthetic experience, pointing out that, although not identical, they do have a strong correspondence.²⁹ At this point, one might then assume that our work in comparing the aesthetic and flow is done. But our understanding of the aesthetic as characterized by Dewey is not the same characterization given by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson.

First, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson conclude, "philosophers describing the aesthetic experience and psychologists describing flow are talking about essentially the same state of mind."³⁰ They argue that when this heightened state of consciousness arises from experiencing an art form, philosophers call it an aesthetic experience; when such a state of mind emerges from other activities, such as sports, social interactions, or work, psychologists call them flow experiences. Such activities, although of a different type of experience, contain the same "structural elements of

consciousness.”³¹ While we don’t dispute their psychological analysis and identified similarities, we do point out that their focus on the “mind” differs from Dewey’s emphasis. Dewey always had a holistic understanding of mind and body in interaction with the environment. As indicated above, he used the word “impulsion” to refer to the whole person moving forward in life. He did not say that one moves through one’s body or by one’s mind. Rather, he interprets it as mind and body functioning together through an environment, which is also continuous with the human being. Furthermore, Dewey would take issue with the idea that aesthetic experiences are isolated to the arts; he argued that the possibility of having an aesthetic experience hovers above any experience, not just experiences with traditional notions of art.³² Thus, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson’s attempt to relegate Dewey’s aesthetic experience to works of art directly counters Dewey’s conceptualization.

Third, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson place a great deal of emphasis on “skill” as being important in aesthetic and flow experiences. We see this clearly in Csikszentmihalyi’s explanation of flow, but we do not believe that refined skill is focused upon or even discussed by Dewey as being an important element in aesthetic experience. Moreover, our own empirical studies have examined workshops in which teachers engage in aesthetically oriented activities in which they have little skill, such as those learning dance for the first time. Yet it is clear that some participants in these workshops had aesthetic experiences.³³ The upshot of our third critique of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson is that we see differences in the aesthetic experience as characterized by Dewey and in the flow experience as articulated by Csikszentmihalyi.

THREE TYPES OF EXPERIENCES AND ANALYSES

Below we describe each type of experience generally and then we discuss each through the lens of the three elements, triggers, characterizations, and import. Throughout we suggest implications for K–12 education, and as our analysis progresses, we offer salient points of comparison that would be meaningful to educators who wish to implement such ideas. We hope that by the end of this paper, the reader is able to see how we might best create conditions or triggers for deeply meaningful experiences in K–12 classrooms. This work provides an important foundation for creating, implementing, and reflecting on experience currently undervalued or dismissed altogether in K–12 schooling.

Dewey’s Aesthetic Experience

The term “aesthetic,” meaning capable of sensory perception, comes from the Greek word *aesthetikos*. Dewey claims that any sensory experience has the possibility of becoming an “aesthetic experience.”³⁴ For Dewey, in an aesthetic experience, one fully engages one’s senses in an object or event—perhaps seeing a work of art in a museum; watching, listening, and even smelling the ocean while standing on the

sand; or tasting a fine wine. Thus, while the western philosophical idea of aesthetic experience may have its roots in traditional notions of art, it is possible to have such an experience in all avenues of life.³⁵ This was a radical idea in Dewey's text, with which many disagreed,³⁶ but our work has corroborated Dewey's insistence that all experiences have the potential to be aesthetic. When so engaged at such times, we often lose ourselves in the task at hand, forgetting about time and daily concerns. We are, in short, fully engrossed in the undergoing experience.³⁷

Triggers

As we indicated earlier, a trigger is the point of entry. One might ask, what gets an individual into a particular kind of experience? In terms of aesthetic experience, we note that one can be triggered by chance or it can be intentional. That is, one can adopt an aesthetic attitude or intention and try to have aesthetic experiences by going to an art museum or to the ocean. An aesthetic experience cannot be forced, but the conditions can be set up to offer the opportunity. Sometimes, however, aesthetic experiences are unintentional. One can go about one's routines and momentarily get caught up in the sensory aspect of the environment. Perhaps a sunset that appears outside the car window or a song plays on the radio. In this case, one did not intend to have an aesthetic experience, but it happened nonetheless. The intentional and unintentional triggers have implications for what teachers may do with students in their classrooms. We discuss this matter later in this paper.

Characterization

The second category we offer is characterization, which deals with how one describes the experience. Dewey describes aesthetic experience in this way:

In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in 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. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd . . . the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.³⁸

Dewey notes that in such an experience one may feel joy, heightened vitality, harmony, and a sense of being in the moment. In the end, Dewey was not one to elaborate on the feelings undergone during an aesthetic experience in an analytic fashion. Art critic and historian, Monroe Beardsley,³⁹ however, a student of Dewey's ideas, did elaborate and noted the following: a focus on a particular object or setting, a feeling of unity with that object or setting, a sense of timelessness, a feeling of self-expansion

or edification, a rush of sensory material, and a feeling of disinterest. (We take issue with the notion of disinterest below.) A point to be noticed with aesthetic experience, as described by Dewey and elaborated upon by Beardsley, is that the journey involved leads to what we like to call a “wow” experience. It is joyful, focused, and memorable. The experience, using Dewey’s term, is “consummated”⁴⁰ and such experiences may be brief or lengthy (drinking a cup of coffee or enjoying a fine meal).⁴¹ In today’s parlance, one might call this type of experience an intrinsically rewarding one—something often overlooked by educators focused on the more technocratic aspects of education, such as setting-specific goals with measurable outcomes.

Import

The third category we consider is import, which refers to the perceived value of the experience for the actor(s). In regard to the import of aesthetic experience, we suggest that there are both uniform and multidirectional possibilities. By uniform, we mean that aesthetic experiences yield the possibilities for future aesthetic experiences along the same lines. When one experiences heightened vitality—for example, in an art museum—one is likely to return to the art museum for such experiences. By multidirectional possibilities, we mean that aesthetic experience yields opportunities in new or fresh directions. Having an aesthetic experience with a modern painting opens up possibilities for having such an experience not only with other kinds of art, but also with other kinds of conditions entirely. Imagine that one has an aesthetic experience in looking at an image of a raft floating down a river (e.g., a George Caleb Bingham painting). That experience has the opportunity to awaken one to having firsthand experiences on a river. Eventually, one may become environmentally active. We reject, however, the idea that an aesthetic experience must be a disinterested one, and we note the action-oriented possibilities that an aesthetic experience affords—a point that Elaine Scarry has made about the role of beauty in the world.⁴²

Aesthetic experiences, then, can be either intentional or happenstance, may occur over long periods of time or briefly, and may cultivate the desire for similar experiences and related heightened awareness. In contrast, as we show below, religious experiences rely more deeply on imaginative possibilities and manifestations of the ideal.

DEWEY’S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In his seminal work on the topic of religion and religious experience, entitled *A Common Faith*,⁴³ Dewey attempted to provide a roadmap for his vision of religious faith through his democratic humanist lens. Although Dewey wrote periodically on the subjects of religion and religious experience throughout his career, *A Common Faith* was his most extensive and explicit attempt at examining these topics. In this work, Dewey makes various points that are particularly salient to this paper. In particular, he separates religious experience from religion, arguing that one does

not have to believe in a particular religion to have religious experiences. In fact, he suggests that organized religions often inhibit religious experience.

In the first section of *A Common Faith*, Dewey seeks to make a clear distinction between the words *religion* and *religious*. Accordingly, religion was “a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of organization.”⁴⁴ Dewey argued that religions were historically and contemporarily affected by sociocultural contexts and in need of being restructured again, as they served largely to divide people (as evidenced by the many different religious orientations and their differing doctrines). As such, because religious experience has been exclusively claimed by the religions, individuals not associated with them may have religious experiences but “are not even aware of attitudes in themselves that if they came to fruition would be genuinely religious.”⁴⁵ Dewey overtly sets out to free religious experience from religions so that religious experiences are no longer viewed as “rare and infrequent” and could be more universally enjoyed and profited from than at present.⁴⁶

In contrast to his definition of religion, Dewey indicated that the word “religious” refers to the quality of an experience that may or may not have any direct connection to religion, thus separating the exalted status of a religious experience from religion as an institution. Dewey’s humanist perspective becomes quite clear in his description of religious experience, as he notes, “Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality.”⁴⁷ This quality of experience may come from an association with religion or from aesthetic, scientific, moral, and political experiences, as well as from experiences with companions or relationships with others.⁴⁸ For Dewey, a religious experience leads to “better adjustment in life and its conditions.”⁴⁹ He explains that “there is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us.”⁵⁰ In other words, a person having a religious experience is at harmony with his or her surroundings, which include people and nature. Though this explanation provides insight into the qualities of a religious experience, it offers no concrete definition.

Dewey viewed religious experience as living between what exists and what could be, or as he called them, ideal ends. He explained that ideal ends were born out of a person’s imagination, and grounded in existing conditions where he or she visualizes the possibilities of what might be and acts upon that vision. For example, one might feel strongly about environmental causes—perhaps the idea of saving polar bears from extinction. In thinking through how she would advocate for the bears, she is using her imagination to bring potential into something concrete. Perhaps in seeking her goal, she aims to create awareness in schools through media presentations. When so engaged, she is having temporal moments of a religious experience. Dewey also asserts that the outcome of a religious experience is inherently good because it in some way leads to the betterment of society.

For Dewey, a religious experience can manifest itself in a number of different ways. He explains that a religious experience “takes place in different persons in a multitude of ways. It is sometimes brought about by devotion to a cause; sometimes by a passage of poetry that opens a new perspective; sometimes as was the case with Spinoza—deemed an atheist in his day—through philosophical reflection.”⁵¹ Regardless of its manifestation, he notes that the religious quality of an experience “is the *effect* produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production.”⁵² In short, a religious experience lies in the middle of any experience where one considers what is, imagines the possibilities or ideal ends, and acts upon that vision to make the idea a reality. This point was so important to Dewey that he asserted that he would “give the name God” to the “active relation between ideal and actual.”⁵³

Triggers

Triggers for religious experience may lie in any number of opportunities, and can include questions (as found in the scientific method), ideal ends, or imagination, among other elements. Something as simple as looking at an automobile might trigger one to have a religious experience in conceiving of and working toward developing an improved mode of transportation. In short, Dewey argues that ideal ends get one into the experience—any idea, situation, mode of ceativity, experience, goal, or imagined alternative that helps one consider a new ideal.

Much like aesthetic experience, the trigger of a religious experience can happen by chance or intention. In fact, Dewey noted that *any* experience can have a religious quality (similarly, any experience can have an aesthetic quality). But whereas aesthetic experience is particularly sensory, religious experience is more ideal-focused and as such does not need to be triggered by some qualitative aspect of the world.

Characterization

At one point in *A Common Faith* Dewey makes the curious observation: “. . . whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious.”⁵⁴ While it seems that Dewey is on thin ice in trying to characterize what is genuine and what is not (fear is not genuine—“fear never gave stable perspective in the life of anyone”),⁵⁵ his intention is clear in that he aims to rid the religious of supernatural elements. Aspects of experience that Dewey does see as genuine include: dependence on the cooperation of nature, humility, dignity, piety, intelligence and purpose, understanding and knowledge, faith in disclosing of truth through inquiry, and loyalty to ideals.⁵⁶ In typical fashion, Dewey redefines these terms such that, for example, piety is not about devotion and reverence to God, but rather to “a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts.”⁵⁷ Piety “recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable.”⁵⁸ For Dewey, the religious feelings we often associate with the supernatural are in actuality part and parcel of the natural world.

Two more points should be noted here. Dewey acknowledges that mystical experiences exist and that they may be part of religious experience. As he puts it, "There is no reason for denying the existence of experiences that are called mystical. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that . . . they occur so frequently that they may be regarded as normal manifestations that take place at certain rhythmic points in the movement of experience."⁵⁹ Thus, once again, Dewey ties mystical experience (the feeling of oneness of the universe) to nature and not the supernatural.

Finally, Dewey notes that the religious is marked by "adjustment."⁶⁰ That is, religious experience causes "changes in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are . . . inclusive and deep seated."⁶¹ He continues:

They relate not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety. Because of their scope, this modification of ourselves is enduring. It lasts through any amount of vicissitude There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being"⁶²

Thus, we can see the tangible differences from the aesthetic. But to be clear, it is not the case that the two types of experiences are unrelated. The aesthetic and religious dimensions or elements of an experience may conjoin, intermingle, and be part of one continual experience that an individual undergoes. It is in analysis that one might note that an experience has more of an aesthetic quality or religious quality. Nonetheless, we note that the aesthetic is dominated by sensory qualities, joyful feelings, a heightened sense of vitality, and a feeling of consummation. Religious qualities yield harmony, oneness, a feeling of deep-seated change, and, importantly, imagination of the ideal.

Import

Religious experience made Dewey no longer doubt the value and meaning of life. Dewey believed religious experience to be an essential portion of the ongoing process of life and growth both for the individual and for society;⁶³ it is the essence of human growth. For Dewey, striving for the ideal is where we all should live our lives and is a means to happiness. From Dewey's perspective, the authentically religious holds the potential to unify the natural, scientific, moral, and social dimensions of experience. Once properly understood,

religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame.⁶⁴

In comparison, then, an aesthetic experience may lead one to action, but it does not necessarily do so. An aesthetic experience does lead to heightened sensory experience

that yields an intrinsic reward in the process. A religious experience brings forth an adjustment to life, one that carries over into one's general outlook on the world.

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Experience

We remind the reader that we examine Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about flow because many teachers are familiar with them and wonder, as we did, about its difference from aesthetic experience. A key difference is that flow results from a psychological perspective that focuses on mind and consciousness, as opposed to Dewey's ideas, which are holistic through and through. Thus, flow, as conceptualized by Csikszentmihalyi, is ultimately the answer to the question: how do humans find happiness? Referring to Aristotle, Csikszentmihalyi⁶⁵ notes that what men and women seek most in the world is happiness, and yet we fail to understand or achieve it. He further explains that "happiness is not something that happens"⁶⁶ and is not dependent on outside events, but rather our interpretations of them. For Csikszentmihalyi, the key to happiness is the ability to control our inner experience.⁶⁷ He observes:

The choice is simple: between now and the inevitable end of our days, we can choose either to live or to die. Biological life is in an automatic process, as long as we take care of the needs of the body. But to live in the sense the poet means it is by no means something that will happen by itself. In fact, everything conspires against it: if we don't take charge of its direction, our life will be controlled by the outside to serve the purpose of some other agency.⁶⁸

The meaningful inner experiences to which Csikszentmihalyi refers are characterized by exhilaration, a deep sense of joy, and a sense of control. These are optimal, or flow, experiences. Humans seek them out because they are the hallmarks of a life well lived.

Triggers

What gets people into flow experiences is our ability to control the "contents of our consciousness,"⁶⁹ where consciousness is defined as the "'things' we see, feel, think, and desire—are information that we can manipulate and use; . . . [as] intentionally ordered information."⁷⁰ Csikszentmihalyi argues that "outside events do not exist unless we are aware of them."⁷¹ Our intentions, or desires and biological and social needs, are what keep the consciousness ordered like "magnetic fields," attracting and repelling objects and stimuli.

Understanding Csikszentmihalyi's description of consciousness allows us to understand how we then seek and engage in optimal experience: we must control our "psychic energy" and the ways we "structure our intention(s)."⁷² More specifically, in order to control our consciousness and engage in flow experiences, we must reduce "psychic entropy" and allow ourselves deep concentration in the moment.⁷³ Prolonged spells of psychic entropy, or disruptions in consciousness, impair our effectiveness in doing so.

Flow experience is generally not achieved by happenstance but rather through a “struggle for establishing control over attention.”⁷⁴ This battle for the self requires disciplined concentration and even practice. Spontaneous flow events could arise in a social situation, for example, but they are still a result of ongoing skill development in social interaction.

To illustrate the point, Csikszentmihalyi frequently refers to the rock climber and her deep engagement with the rock. It is through practice and attention to skill development that she is able to engage in an exhilarating and absorbing experience; it is not by chance that she has such an experience. Similarly, one who attends a dinner party where the conversation evolves into a meaningful and jubilant discussion, with give and take among all participants, has a flow experience, even though it simply “emerged” unexpectedly. However, the conditions for such an experience were ripe and the participants had to have a certain level of social skills to collectively create such an experience.⁷⁵ The vast majority of flow experiences, according to the Csikszentmihalyi’s research, “are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules.”⁷⁶

No matter the experience—rock climbing, social conversation, running, or writing poetry—flow experiences are triggered by the one experiencing it: an individual makes it happen. We gain a sense of mastery, of “participation in determining the content of life.”⁷⁷ Thus, we may note that while aesthetic and religious experiences might happen by either chance or intention, for Csikszentmihalyi, flow experience is only triggered by intention. We also note that with Dewey’s aesthetic experience, there are moments of “surrender” to that experience.⁷⁸ Control is not a dominant element.

Characterization

Flow experience is best characterized by “total involvement with life,”⁷⁹ including a sense of control whereby we feel we are the masters of our own fate. It is the magic “golden ratio”⁸⁰ between boredom and anxiety. We are exhilarated and active in our role in the experience, and our “body or mind is stretched to its limits.”⁸¹ Many report that flow experiences are difficult to achieve, like climbing rocks or running marathons, but nonetheless they are worthwhile and even addictive.

Flow experiences require intense concentration that eliminates distraction and any sense that one might wish to be elsewhere. This feeling of connectedness and being “in the moment” is furthered by the skill required to engage in the experience. A climber ascending up the rock focuses her energies on the feel of the rock, the bumps in the ridges, and the distances between footholds. Distractions are not only irritating, but also potentially dangerous.

In this example, the climber receives immediate feedback regarding her skill and achievement; a well-placed toe sticks to the rock. Her skill level sufficiently meets the immediate challenge. As she rhythmically climbs higher, her “consciousness is harmoniously ordered” because her skills “match the opportunities for action.”⁸² In

addition to the matching of skill and challenge, flow requires a set of internal guidelines.⁸³ Such guidelines may be developed in advance or at times invented or negotiated in the moment, such as with jazz music or playground games. The criteria for a “successful” experience may be personally referenced or jointly constructed and shared.

In summation, Csikszentmihalyi identifies eight elements of enjoyment in the flow experience (and at least one must be present for flow to occur): chance of task completion; ability to concentrate; the concentration is a result of a definite aim and immediate feedback; a deep but effortless involvement that removes worries of daily life; a sense of control over one’s actions; and a lack of concern for the self.⁸⁴

Import

But aren’t these just “great experiences?” Csikszentmihalyi argues that the more flow experiences we have, the higher our quality of life. Beyond being great experiences, those who consistently engage in flow states “develop a stronger, more confident self, because more of their psychic energy has been invested successfully in goals they themselves had chosen to pursue.”⁸⁵

Not only are flow experiences enjoyable, but they also lead to continued growth of the self by resulting in a more complex consciousness through two general processes: differentiation and integration. Differentiation moves us toward uniqueness; integration moves us toward union with others. Says Csikszentmihalyi, “A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.”⁸⁶

Flow contributes to the development of our complexity by building confidence in our ability to accomplish difficult tasks, along with contributing to our sense of connectedness and focus. Together, flow experiences allow us to “develop skills and make significant contributions to humankind.”⁸⁷

Ultimately, the goal of flow experience is to free ourselves from societal rewards and to instead place psychic rewards “under our own powers.”⁸⁸ We do this by finding the rewards in each moment and by changing our perception of external conditions through concentration and mental discipline. Thus, like aesthetic experience, flow focuses on the journey rather than the outcome per se. But also like aesthetic experience, flow may lead to action. The aesthetic, however, may lead to uniform or multidirectional possibilities; flow leads to uniformity.

COMPARISONS AND CONNECTIONS

Below we weave together some of the ideas above and point out more explicitly their similarities and differences in reference to the educational enterprise. The aim is to provide ways of thinking about teaching, curriculum, and learning. Therefore, we offer the following ideas as conversation starters rather than conclusions. Before delving into the comparisons, however, we reiterate a point made at the beginning of the paper. We believe that educators ought to foster opportunities for all three types of experiences in schools and classrooms. The implications of the aesthetic⁸⁹ and flow⁹⁰

have been well argued and documented. In short, such experiences yield memorable and enjoyable journeys that provide a richer and deeper teaching and learning experience. What we did not anticipate as we began this project is that we would recommend Dewey's notion of religious experience as well. But as we see it, Dewey extricates the religious from religion, or in today's language the spiritual from organized religion. As such, he provides a reasonable recommendation to foster experiences that bring together the ideal with the actual, and in the process yield feelings of awe, wonder, and humility in the face of new ideas and knowledge. Some scholars before us have followed this path of thinking using different conceptual frameworks, but have found similar rationales for examining Dewey's thinking about the religious.⁹¹

Comparisons and Connections: Triggers

When examining the three types of experiences together, triggers were a priority for us in considering K-12 classrooms because educators would want to lead students into these types of experiences. As noted above, however, no one can force anyone into having an aesthetic, flow, or religious experience. So what can educators do? We believe teachers must know how to infuse relevant cues into their lessons as well as create the conditions for such experiences. One of the interesting yet thorny aspects of how we initiate such an experience is that some triggers are intentional and some unintentional. Of the three types of experiences, we see that flow experiences require the most direct and specific intention, as they generally require a certain amount of practice and skill development. Similarly, aesthetic and religious experiences may involve specific triggers, such as objects of focus and a beauty-filled environment, but aesthetic and religious experiences can also be somewhat happenstance and unexpected.

We would like to reiterate that teachers cannot force anyone to feel or to react in a certain way, but they can create environments in which such experiences are more likely to occur. Time and space, materials, a release of overbearing expectations, and genuine exploration time can support the prevalence of flow and aesthetic experiences. Such time and space is arguably most important if we wish to create the conditions for religious experience, as the main trigger for the religious is the imagination. Students must be able to see current conditions and to imagine the ideal so it may be brought to fruition. An imagining of the ideal is not required for the other two types of experiences.

Comparisons and Connections: Characterizations

The three experiences demonstrate significant overlap in their characterizations—that is, what one feels during the experience: a sense of connectedness; timelessness; joy; harmony with surroundings; and unity with life. Other adjectives may apply as well in denoting similarities, but we also note there are some specific differences. Whereas flow experience requires “control,” aesthetic experience entails moments of “surrender.” And on an entirely different level, religious experience requires faith in an ideal.⁹² Thus, students in classrooms may undergo varying

types of experiences as outlined by the three above. Teachers are not in a position to affect experiences undergone, but by being aware of such characterizations they can have some understanding of what students are feeling and try to modulate the progress of the overall experience during class time.

We also note that each kind of experience has at least one unique quality. For the aesthetic, the emphasis is on the sensory; for flow, the emphasis is on the relationship between challenge and skill; and for the religious, the emphasis is on the imagination bringing an ideal to fruition. Therefore, we again want teachers to understand that attending to all three areas of emphasis not only provides insight into how students will feel during the experience, but also intentions and opportunities that can be brought to light and incorporated during the school day. Teachers can a) provide opportunities for sensory experiences and a deepened awareness of them; b) encourage students to find areas of interest in which they wish to practice their skills; and c) engage students' imaginations and help them become aware of a variety of social issues that might be addressed, whether they be social injustices, problems concerning environmental pollution, or inequities in equal access to a quality education.

Comparisons and Connections: Import

The ultimate aims or outcomes of the three kinds of experiences have relevance both for individuals and for society. Individual benefits, especially for aesthetic and flow experiences, include the desire for more of such experiences because they are in themselves fulfilling. The aesthetic has multidirectional possibilities and may enhance our desire for and awareness of future aesthetic experiences, or it may inspire us to engage with other areas of our lives. While flow may also lead us to future, distinct interests, it is generally more autotelic in nature, and involves the development of self-confidence.

Religious experience is clearly multidimensional in its possibilities and has the greatest potential to impact large numbers of people outside of the one having the experience. For example, one might consider the current status of public education in the US, recognizing that students are over-tested, that children from low-income neighborhoods are not succeeding in school and beyond, and that many youths are feeling more and more disconnected from school. One might imagine an ideal situation where school is engaging for all, is focused on experiencing academic success through authentic assessment, and is flexible enough to engage students to see the relevance of what they are learning. As such, one might take it upon oneself to try to change the situation. Any achieved outcome, be it involving legislation or even the publication of an article espousing these ideas, might serve to benefit society and, in turn, be the vehicle for an experience with religious qualities.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

We reiterate that we are drawing upon three kinds of experiences whose origins were not borne specifically out of school experience, but out of life itself. By attending to

life experience in the classroom, the teacher who consciously orchestrates a variety of these experiences for students and talks with them about their associated qualities provides the conditions for meaningful learning, while also engendering in students the ability to trigger such experiences in their out-of-school lives.

Our analytical distinctions provide educators with three broad categories with which to imagine how they might create conditions for a variety of experiences with the aim of fostering high-quality, meaningful, and memorable learning opportunities. Aesthetic experiences enhance our sensibilities and sensitivities; religious experiences provide a manifestation of an imagined ideal; and flow experiences lead to skill development and greater happiness. All three types of experiences produce for the individual an outcome that is rich and meaningful for both in-school life and out-of-school life, and all three contribute in some way toward the betterment of humankind.

What is most salient here for educators is the shift in focus from what is taught to what is experienced. Such focus creates a space for students to find relevance in what they are learning, and in how they are learning. This space stands in rather striking contrast to the archetypal images we might conjure up when we think about traditional schooling—images, for example, of students slumped over desks, of students sitting quietly in rows, or of students staring at classroom clocks in anticipation of the end of class.

We see also in this shift of focus particular import for our current era of standardized curriculum and testing. A teacher who attends to the quality of experience ultimately honors the lives of her students, the educational journey on which they are all embarking, and the democratic principles of civic participation. The teacher who attends to experience in this way need not ask herself “How do I make this relevant?” because the experience itself is relevant, even if the associated content may not be so immediately. As Noddings⁹³ reminds us, “some days our aim is not to produce specific learning, but to inspire.”⁹⁴

Such an assertion begs a deeply philosophical question: what is the aim of schools? If that answer, as political rhetoric would indicate, is that schools are a vehicle for economic prosperity in the US, one might be more inclined to respond that schools function in support of that end. If, however, the answer to that question is something like developing well-rounded human beings, or “happiness,”⁹⁵ or to cultivate caring, engaged, satisfied, and productive citizens,⁹⁶ a focus on the quality of experience, rather than on a seemingly detached collection of knowledge and skills, might be more appropriate. If we agree that the experience of our students deserves much greater attention, we then offer our readers a means for triggering such deeply meaningful experiences.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934).
2. CRISPA is an acronym that stands for connections, risk taking, imagination, sensorial experiences, perceptivity, and active engagement.

3. See P. B. Uhrmacher, B. M. Conrad, and C. M. Moroye, "Finding the Balance between Process and Product through Perceptual Lesson Planning," *Teachers College Record* 115, no. 7 (2013); Moroye and Uhrmacher, "Aesthetic Themes as Conduits to Creativity," in *Cultivating curious and creative minds. The Role of Teachers and Teacher Educators. Part 1: Teacher Education Yearbook XVIII*, eds. Cheryl J. Craig and Louise F. Deretchin (Lanham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield Education, 2010), 99–114; Moroye and Uhrmacher, "Standards, Not Standardization: Orchestrating Aesthetic Educational Experiences," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 28, no. 1 (2012): 13. P. B. Uhrmacher, "Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences," *Curriculum Inquiry* 39, no. 5 (2009): 613–36.

4. For example, see Britt Jakobson and Per-Olof Wickman, "The Roles of Aesthetic Experience in Elementary School Science," *Research in Science Education* 38, no. 1 (1953/2008): 45–65; Kevin Pugh and Mark Girod, "Science, Art, and Experience: Constructing a Science Pedagogy from Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Science Teacher Education* 18 (2007): 9–27; Mark Girod and David Wong, "An Aesthetic (Deweyan) Perspective on Science Learning: Case Studies of Three Fourth Graders," *Elementary School Journal* 102, no. 3 (2002): 199–224; Uhrmacher, "Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences," Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

5. For example, Jim Garrison, "Walt Whitman, John Dewey, and Primordial Artistic Communication," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 47, no. 3 (2011): 301–318.

6. For example, see David T. Hansen, "John Dewey and a Curriculum of Moral Knowledge," *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue* 9, no. 1/2 (2007): 173–81; Shulamit Gribov, "John Dewey's Pragmatism and Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education* (2001): 373–80.

7. See Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Nancy F. Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism: The Importance of Self-Definition in Research* (Albany: State University of New York Rowe, 1987); Steven C. Rockefeller, *Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

8. Miedema, "The Beyond in the Midst: The Relevance of Dewey's Philosophy of Religion for Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13 (1995): 229–41.

9. For example, see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

10. William Gaudelli and Randall Hewitt, "The Aesthetic Potential of Global Issues Curriculum," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 2 (2010): 83–99; Carol Wintermute, "Art as Truth," *Humanism and the Arts* 66, no. 1 (2006): 39–41; Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

11. Also see Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience & Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987).

12. Rockefeller, *Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*.

13. Ben A. Minteer, "Pragmatism, Piety, and Environmental Ethics," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 12 (2008): 179–96.

14. See Joseph Grange, *John Dewey, Confucius, and Global Philosophy (SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture)* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

15. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1990).

16. For example, see Howard E. Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon William, *Good work* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
17. For example, see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
18. For example, see Maria M. Wong and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Motivation and Academic Achievement: The Effects of Personality Traits and the Quality of Experience," *Journal of Personality* 59 (1991): 539–74.
19. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).
20. Susan A. Jackson, "Toward a Conceptual Understanding of the Flow Experience in Elite Athletes," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67 (1996): 76–90.
21. Shannon M. Augustine and Michelle Zoss, "Aesthetic Flow Experience in the Teaching of Preservice Language Arts Teachers," *English Education* 39, no. 1 (2006): 72–95.
22. Augustine and Zoss, "Aesthetic Flow Experience in the Teaching of Preservice.
23. Mary J. Neitz and James V. Spickard, "Steps Toward a Sociology of Religious Experience: The Theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Alfred Schutz," *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. (1990): 15–33.
24. Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
25. Elliot Eisner, personal communication, 1986.
26. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
27. Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*.
28. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 58.
29. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991), 7–8.
30. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 8.
31. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 9.
32. See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 18–19.
33. See P. B. Uhrmacher K. and Bunn, K, "Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado, Stage 1," unpublished evaluation for the Colorado Chapter of Young Audiences, 2005; Uhrmacher and Bunn, "Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado, Stage II," unpublished evaluation for the Colorado Chapter of Young Audiences, 2004.
34. See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chapter 1.
35. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4.
36. See Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953).
37. See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 36.
38. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4–5.
39. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Some Persistent Issues in Aesthetics," In *The Aesthetic Point of View*, edited by M. J. Wreen and D. M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).
40. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 17.
41. *Ibid.*, 36.
42. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
43. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (1934; repr., Clinton, MA: Yale University Press, 2013).
44. *Ibid.*, 76.
45. *Ibid.*, 75.
46. *Ibid.*, 84.

47. Ibid., 105.
48. Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, 1997.
49. John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 83.
50. Ibid., 87.
51. Ibid., 83.
52. Ibid., 78.
53. Ibid., 144.
54. Ibid., 100.
55. Ibid., 101.
56. Ibid., 101–103.
57. Ibid., 102.
58. Ibid., 102.
59. Ibid., 121.
60. Ibid., 87.
61. Ibid., 87.
62. Ibid., 87.
63. John Dewey, *A Common Faith*.
64. Ibid., 120.
65. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
66. Ibid., 2.
67. Ibid.
68. Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 1.
69. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 2.
70. Ibid., 26.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 35.
73. Ibid., 36–37.
74. Ibid., 40.
75. Ibid., 50.
76. Ibid., 51.
77. Ibid., 4.
78. Dewey 1934, 53.
79. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, xi.
80. Ibid., 52.
81. Ibid., 3.
82. Ibid., 6.
83. Ibid., 56.
84. Ibid., 49.
85. Ibid., 40.
86. Ibid., 41.
87. Ibid., 42.
88. Ibid., 19.

89. See Uhrmacher, “Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences;” Jakobson and Wickman, “The Roles of Aesthetic Experience in Elementary School Science;” Pugh and Girod, “Science, Art, and Experience: Constructing a Science Pedagogy from Dewey’s Aesthetics,” 2007; Girod and Wong, “An Aesthetic (Deweyan) Perspective on Science Learning: Case Studies of Three Fourth Graders.”

90. See D. J. Shernoff and M. Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow in schools: Cultivating engaged learners and optimal learning environments," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools*, eds., R. Gilman, E. S. Huebner, and M. Furlong, 131–45 (New York: Routledge, 2009).
91. See Miedema, "The Beyond in the Midst."
92. See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 33.
93. Nel Noddings, "High Morale in a Good Sense," *Educational Leadership* 71, no. 5 (201.4): 15–18.
94. *Ibid.*, 18.
95. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).
96. See Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 10.

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