

Book Review

The Possibilities of Play in the Classroom: On the Power of Aesthetic Experience in Teaching, Learning, and Researching. Margaret Macintyre Latta. New York: Peter Lang, 2001, 124 pages.

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The beauty of inviting and acknowledging the processes and/or the products of learning in myriad forms to emerge, of believing in a philosophical artistic eurhythmia that can be born from both the harmonious and the discordant elements in our environment, of celebrating the aesthetics of and in education: these comprise a foundation in this book through studious participation in the processes of creating in teaching, learning, and researching. Latta indicates that her purpose with this book is to explore the possibilities and concrete implications of aesthetic play in school. How this is done reaches into fine arts in an overall sense, bringing a large-scale applicability and potential interest for this work in education.

With this book Latta describes an artistic journey in which she creates slowly, carefully, sometimes with awkward articulation, and other times with strong, fluent stances, reexploration results. The writing of this entire book in the present tense is effective, intentionally or unintentionally, in presenting these variations in work experience, in showing the gradual development of perceptual confidence and artistic form as the description progresses.

Latta examines the creating process over a two-year period with three teachers and 26 middle-age students in the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, Calgary Board of Education, via a presentation of relevant theory in educational research, in aesthetic and ontological philosophy, followed by a description of her participation with and interviewing of students, parents, teachers, and a reflection in this work of the simultaneous relations of the theory and practice of aesthetic play.

Latta creates this artistic research publication through the metaphoric image of collage. In her study she includes illustrative collages of her own in which she develops thematic *textual* artwork as a part of each. Examples of student collages have been chosen and included as well. The collages are a beautiful component of the demonstration in this book of aesthetic play. They form stations of beauty for the reader to visit, experience, and integrate with the research. For this reason it is surprising that no colored works were included; having even a few collages in color could have had strong effect.

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Continual interaction on Latta's part with both teachers and students brings insights and findings. One of the teachers involved, Laurie, notes emphatically that in teaching-learning situations with aesthetic play, "dissonance is part of the process" (p. 22), that it is necessary for educators to accept clashes, struggles among all learners, including the teacher, that it can bring what may not come without it. Alex, a student, informs Latta that teachers in this school listen to his "yearning, wonder, fear and confusion" (p. 45) and that he "felt safe to expose pain, to share joy, to convey his unique perspectives" (p. 45).

Latta agrees with Kant's assertion that "aesthetic encounters are not mediated through existing rules but result in the creation of rules on which the work can be subsequently talked about" (p. 42). Students need to develop confidence in a "felt freedom" (p. 44) in their learning assignments and the aesthetic becomes, as Latta says, "a medium in which a form emerges through habitual relationships between self and other" (p. 45). Through encouragement and permission "to observe ... to dwell with and in learning situations ... to be receptive to sensory qualities of self and other on an ongoing basis" (p. 23), students come to develop a sense of their own ability, confidence in working with their ideas, and they become a clear, strong part of their own learning processes. Latta asserts that those who play along the learning journey come to belong to learning, that an ontological reciprocity comes to be.

The creating process of students is described by Latta as necessarily involving answerability, referring to the taking of a stand as per one's values "derived from a fundamental reciprocity between self, content, material and form" (p. 65), outsideness as the interpretation of the interdependently constituted self and other that makes answerability possible, and unfinalizability, meaning "an openness to unasked for and unpredictable learnings" (p. 70) for teachers, an open-endedness, a tentative wholeness, for students in their work. In her research observations and participation, Latta concludes, "A curious exchange unfolds between self and other as creators and re-creators of meanings" (p. 72).

Dewey's conditions for teaching and learning including attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogues, inquiring as guided, projection, and self-consciousness are used to emphasize and describe how these are related to experience in the work of one of the middle-school teachers. Latta says that teachers need to "embrace tensions and uncertainties as inherent to teaching and learning, searching for attunement within the development of experience itself" (p. 90).

As a result of her theoretical and pragmatic experience, Latta suggests possibilities and implications for teacher education, particularly that of prospective teachers:

Student teachers ought to have the opportunity to perceive the many relations of parts to whole in teaching/learning situations through the research literature, dialogue, modeling by teacher educators and practicum teachers, observation, and practice. Occasions ought to exist throughout for deliberating on and synthesizing of these interrelated perceptions, allowing experience of aesthetic play in teaching and learning to begin to grow. Practicum experiences ought to be structured to support aesthetic play and encourage student teachers to create aesthetic teaching/learning situations. (p. 106)

Latta believes that constraints of political and social forms may work against her notion of including aesthetic play in teacher education, that it may be regarded as "speculative and idealistic" (p. 107). She feels compelled to take these ideas further and finally states, "I welcome the uncertainty I feel." For me as reader and educator it becomes essential to suggest that the beautiful nature and potential learnings in aesthetic play are such that in fact there may well be quite a number of passionate educators and leaders, even in faculties of education, who will welcome those who are dedicated to working with, participating in, and teaching aesthetic experience. Such is the hope when one breathes with aesthetics.