

Seeking Fragility's Presence: The Power of Aesthetic Play in Teaching and Learning

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The noun *fragility* makes most people nervous. A shattered, weak, perishable item; a delicate frame or character; life's fragility, are images that flood one's mind. Undoubtedly, the word *fragility* stirs much unease in educational communities. The concern for certainties does not embrace such a tentative, contingently held concept. And yet, I have become increasingly aware that fragility can harbor qualities that strengthen.

This awareness of fragility's presence comes first as an artist through attunement to the art making process. As I create with clay on the potter's wheel I am keenly aware of the fragility of my art making experience. While the wheel spins, the heel of my left hand does most of the work as I begin to center the mound of clay. I keep the left arm firmly braced and grasp the clay in both hands with my thumbs resting on top. I respond to the speed of the wheel, the clay's moisture content, concomitantly pressing forward with my left hand and down with my right hand. Suddenly, I watch the clay body take on a life of its own. Separated from me, it spins out of control. Once again, I ready the clay and initiate the centering process. I press the clay into a cone shaped mound. I feel for bumps or irregularities. I know by the feel when it is centered. Perfect centering is crucial for all work on the potter's wheel. The mound of clay now looks as though it were standing still as it continues to turn on the wheel. Through centering the clay on the potter's wheel, I attain a fragile balance. It is a fragility that is central in many respects: central in the sense of a fixed center around which the clay body revolves; central in the sense that it is a critical step in the evolution of the clay body; central in the sense that as the form is shaped and reshaped the center becomes more central, yet increasingly hidden and more uncertain. I have touched the center. I have maintained the center. And yet, the onlooker may respond to the piece, ignorant of this center.

I believe this fragile nature of the aesthetic is paradoxically its strength; such attunement demands openness to the perception, selection, and responsiveness to qualities throughout the making process. Similarly, as I participated with teachers and students negotiating curriculum as aesthetic texts at the Creative Arts Centre, Milton Williams School, the Calgary Board of Education (choosing to value the creating process, primary to the arts, within the middle school as a whole), I saw the continual creation of aesthetic space for teaching and learning perpetuating this fragile nature.¹ The ruptures and interruptions demanded attunement to process. Teachers constantly facilitated learning connections with students.

I was attracted to the Creative Arts Centre's operating definition of the aesthetic emphasizing creating and discovery across curricula. Alongside three teachers and twenty-six students at the middle school over a two-year period I pursued (in a qualitative inquiry) what this meant for teachers and students, and how the aesthetic

might be embodied in teachers' and students' discourses and discursive patterns. Centering this inquiry into the significances of the aesthetic in teaching/learning situations was a similar sense of fragility as I experienced as a potter. It was not fixed in the sense that the fragile balance was always shifting depending on circumstances or contexts. But, it was fixed in the sense that fragility had to be present—a genuine, integral constant of aesthetic space. I desire to render with more clarity this invisible fragility embodied within the visible nature of aesthetic experience for teachers and students at the Creative Arts Centre. Simultaneously extending beyond, and permeating within the visible present, the invisible harbors fragility that forms and reforms aesthetic teaching/learning spaces.

For the purposes of this essay, my attention is drawn to the awareness that the act of creating precipitated for teachers and students. I characterize this awareness as aesthetic play. Aesthetic play was the dominant teaching/learning style in observed classrooms. I use the term style as Jim Garrison associated it with creativity and mode of being.² Aesthetic play refers to attunement to the creating process grounded in the act of making as taken up similarly by Mikhail Bakhtin, John Dewey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.³ Bakhtin's fundamental notion is that from within the act or deed, participatory thinking orients individuals. Gadamer's understanding of play as distinct from self and other reminds me that play has a spirit of its own to which participants must attend and take up. Dewey emphasizes the vital movement of the whole, with all parts linked, not succeeding one another. Initiating, sustaining, and enhancing links between students and learning through aesthetic play was central in these classrooms. Students and teachers took up aesthetic play as a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification between self and subject matter. This entailed teachers and students developing sensitivity to the many nuances and possibilities present in learning situations and a willingness to play along with them.

Teachers, students, and myself (as researcher) grappled with how aesthetic play constituted learning experiences in particular ways. Attending to aesthetic play as a teaching/learning style was difficult for teachers and students. Teachers kept at it claiming aesthetic play to be a worthwhile struggle for themselves and their students. I was constantly reminded, in participating classrooms at the Creative Arts Centre, of the difficulty of living this way in classrooms. I was also reminded at moments in participating classrooms, of the movement of aesthetic play and its potential power in teaching and learning. Touching the movement of aesthetic play in its entirety always felt just beyond my grasp. I fear the words I write flatten the fullness of what I encountered. And yet, the strength of some of these encounters was undeniable. An unsettled, fragile spirit was evoked through aesthetic play that was paradoxical, with strength and fragility rarely acknowledged as existing simultaneously. I developed a tremendous respect for the fragility confronted through aesthetic play. It is to this struggle to shape and give expression to the fragility of aesthetic play that my attention now turns.

For teachers, aesthetic play meant a confidence in encountering learning through involvement in the creating process. By "confidence" I refer to Dewey's sense of confidence denoting "not conscious trust in the efficacy of one's powers but

unconscious faith in the possibilities in the situation. It signifies rising to the needs of the situation.”⁷⁴ Teachers attempted to model this in their classrooms to facilitate such confidence in their students. Teachers searched for ways to draw students in to the depth and complexity of subject matter, positioning students to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations of self and subject matter on an ongoing basis. Time was a necessary aspect in order for teachers and students to be able to dwell in learning situations long enough to wonder, question, and actively participate in learning encounters.

For students, aesthetic play meant a willingness to approach learning as a venture, placing value on curiosity, interests, and commitment to search for meanings through artistic processes. Students had to assume a good part of the responsibility for maintaining involvement in their learning. Students had to respect and value difference and diversity. Students took pleasure interacting with others and varied subject matter, becoming comfortable with learning that was more open-ended and interdisciplinary.

For teachers and students, aesthetic play, as a teaching/learning style, seemed dependent on the confluence of the following interactive qualities. These qualities appeared to form a context that supported and fostered aesthetic play:

1. **Attentiveness:** Through close observation and given time to dwell with and in learning situations, attentiveness was a willingness on teachers’ and students’ parts to be receptive to sensory qualities and relations resulting in greater deliberation and thoughtful responses.
2. **Personal Involvement:** All learning intercepts with personal experience. Knowledge grows from and is a reflection of lived experience; therefore, there are multiple ways in which the world can be known. Divergent ways of approaching learning are respected and encouraged by teachers and in turn by students.
3. **Emotional Commitment:** Aesthetic play was about discovery. The discovery was neither an object or a concept, but an attitude or way of being that acted as a catalyst to learning. Teachers modeled a serious, positive attitude and intensity toward learning that necessitated involvement and participation by all. Emotional commitment was needed, focusing student attention on the task and attending closely to the work at hand. This learning took on a personal significance when commitment was present. Without it, I observed learning to be potentially routine, mechanical, and inert.
4. **Felt Freedom:** Aesthetic play needed space and freedom. A learning space that allowed students some liberty in the ways they chose to engage in learning contributed to a spirit of inquiry. It was the liberation of learning from the confines of mere rote responses, categorization, routine, and hierarchical sequentiality.
5. **Dialogical:** Felt freedom constructed a pattern of thought. Dialogues with self and others were crucial. The discourse entered into became the link to sense-making. It suggested an organization for the inquiry to take. This meant succumbing to the process. In so doing students and teacher gave up exclusive

control. Control became a shared venture; the purpose for learning became a cooperative undertaking.

6. *Inquiry Guided*: I observed that teachers thought through and around learning situations anticipating many possibilities. This advance thinking engaged teachers in finding resources, materials, and background information that supported many possibilities and were a springboard to unanticipated ones. Teachers enjoyed the creative experience in developing teaching/learning situations and wanted students to experience this too. Thus, the organization for learning emerged from the play itself. It was always in the making. As such it required openness to possibilities, attentive listening, and responding. It was a search process that was inquiry-guided. The process determined the form or manner of representation as it evolved. Learning was a venture process for teachers and students.

7. *Projective*: Teachers reported planning activities deliberately to provide students with a wider familiarity with concepts, exposing them to new ways of thinking and working. Such exposure, exploration, and projection seemed to expand the possibilities students drew on. Many students commented that they really enjoyed imagining things as possibly being so. Encouraging projection meant students did not plan all aspects of their learning endeavor to begin with. Time was taken to allow for discovering the potential and letting ideas emerge. This permitted possibilities to be included during the search. This in turn encouraged openness to new ideas and an acceptance of alternatives. Greater flexibility of approach and a willingness to entertain several ideas was observed and documented over the course of the year. Thus, play led students to be able to posit alternative possibilities. Without a playful approach to thinking it seemed that imaginative thought, requiring speculation and conjecturing about possibilities, might not be possible.

8. *Self Consciousness*: Relations between self and subject matter were continually addressed. I observed and documented many students whose self-concept and regard for themselves as learners reflected a dramatic growth through the course of the inquiry. Thus, aesthetic play fostered a greater sense of self as a learner and thinker.

Friedrich Schiller refers to a phenomenon he terms "living shape" suggesting, "only as the form of something lives in our sensation, and its life takes form in our understandings, is it living shape."⁵ His portrayal resonates with the movement of aesthetic play in classrooms. The living shape created an organic space to play with ideas, search for connections, and see possibilities for students and teachers. Students and teachers were players in this aesthetic space with these qualities of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogic, inquiry-guided, projective, and self-consciousness, folding, unfolding, and feeding back into each other and themselves.

The movement created by these folding and unfolding qualities was shaped by aesthetic play, from which, through which, and into which, meanings were kept in flux. A play of meanings emerged animated with movement and life. As students and

teachers yielded to this movement they learned to act/think within “the accordances and limitations of medium.”⁶ Fragility was necessarily present acting as a catalyst in this ongoing attunement between the arising conditional accordances and limitations. But, I was increasingly aware that it was not the identified qualities that were fragile, but rather, the movement in-between these qualities. Underlying this dynamic were tenuous and delicate relationships occurring in the space between students, teachers, subject matter, context, and processes. Meanings were generated within these relationships in which each brought forth characteristics of the other. In so doing, students and teachers found themselves absorbed in relations that could never be reduced to a rule. And yet, hidden rules emerged, a direction revealed, within the integrative acts themselves. Understandings were precipitated between and within this vital movement.

Dunne ponders, “It is in fact the source of this movement that we have all the time been glimpsing in understanding itself and which has, moreover, all the time been making itself felt in our own attempt to understand it.”⁷ I am struck by how aptly Dunne’s portrayal parallels my attempt to understand the movement of aesthetic play felt and experienced with students and teachers at the Creative Arts Centre. My further search for the source of this movement uncovers three pervading patterns. First, there was a pattern of fundamental involvement by all those participating in teaching/learning situations. Aesthetic play revealed genuine participation through the students’ curiosity, passion, watchfulness, thoughtfulness, and courage. Thus, an implicit expectation of aesthetic play was that learning was a close encounter between self and other. This intimacy seemed to breed wonder and delight as well as reconciliation and tentativeness in learning. A restless search for meaning characterized the participation.

Second, there was a pattern with regard to the interpretive nature of each participant’s involvement in the world. The present seemed constructed on the basis of a significant past; the past seemed reconstructed on the basis of the present. An on-going play between one’s past and present revealed itself in a particular way of knowing, seeing, and acting in the world. As Dewey claims, this play is immediate “but its content consists of a mediation of present materials by ideas drawn from the past experience.”⁸

Third, there was a pattern of reciprocity between subject and world in which participants acknowledge the conjuncture of qualities making a situation unique. Reciprocity entailed the continual improvising of relations between self and other. It required attunement to the specificity of situations. It demanded that participants be present within the moment, taking in, receiving, and acting in response to the situations in which they found themselves.

I believe these three underlying patterns are constituted within Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied knowledge—the knowledge acquired through our body’s exploration of the world.⁹ Merleau-Ponty grounds embodied knowledge in perception, a synthesis of thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting. Embodied knowledge brings thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting into a vital relationship. The dynamic interchange is aesthetic play—perception and its complement, expression,

intertwined in a body-world relationship. Merleau-Ponty explains that the body organizes and gives structure to the phenomenal field at the same time as the world recedes beyond and transcends our body's immediate grasp of it.¹⁰ Perception, then, is a constant organizing and reorganizing encounter. At the heart of perception is the capacity to discern an organization guided by the anticipation of the whole; the lived conjunction of body-world in an ever organizing/reorganizing movement. Simultaneously, then, aesthetic play is means and consequence, process and product, rather than alternating or distinct entities. One's body becomes the place, the determining ground where this conjuncture is exemplified. Merleau-Ponty describes such a place as a sensible thing—holding together of itself, cohering into things, embodying within it a unity of sense.¹¹

I came to see teachers' and students' aesthetic play, embracing perception and expression, as a mediating ground for living the conjuncture of theory/practice in classrooms. Such a mediating ground does not prescribe proper responses but instead asks teachers and students to attend to understanding what the encounter says. Theory is thus understood as occurring within situations, arising out of the purposes and particularities encountered. It comes to constitute a practice understood as a way of being and working. As these practices are not standard but aim for attunement within situations, theory and practice are always in the making. It seems the mediating ground comprises, as Merleau-Ponty identifies, a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence refers to the inherent pervading qualities of encounters.¹² Common pervading qualities of attentiveness, personal involvement, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogue, inquiry-guidedness, projective, and self-consciousness, persist through aesthetic play. Thus aesthetic play requires that participants live in situations and remain engrossed in learning relationships. Aesthetic play also assumes that learning is a search that acknowledges complexity and comprehensiveness. These requirements comprise the immanent raw materials. Dewey speaks of art materials undergoing change towards the formation of a work of art (*AE*, 74). Similarly, raw materials or qualities progressively reform and shape aesthetic play. Elliot Eisner explains that "experience is what we achieve as those qualities come to be known. It is through qualitative inquiry, the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world, that we make sense."¹³

Merleau-Ponty's transcendence refers to that which moves in the movement of aesthetic play, arising out of immanence.¹⁴ Thus, the agentic possibilities are suggested through perceiving the qualitative world. Dewey insists that perception is about seeing through possibilities, not constraints. Aesthetic play reveals possibilities that suggest implications for teaching/learning situations. These implications for teachers, students, curriculum, and context can be characterized as uncharted ground. The uncharted ground of aesthetic play centers on building relationships between teachers, students, curriculum, and context. Educating takes form through the confluence of particular relationships that are encountered. The mediation becomes the design for learning in an ever emerging, changing form. The continual creation of aesthetic space for teaching and learning mediates between seeing/acting, process/product, student/teacher, theory/practice, and subjective/objective, and fleshes out the fragile nature of this uncharted ground. These

interactive relationships are, as May explains, “both perceptive and receptive, just as form and substance are inseparable in art.”¹⁵ Balance is always fragile. Uncharted ground requires fragile exploration in order to make one’s way as a student and teacher. Discernment of the mean is required.¹⁶ Aristotle terms such discernment *phronesis*, a practical wisdom. *Phronesis* surfaces through teachers’ and students’ words, actions, and feelings. This is not a generalizable imposed wisdom, but specific to a moment, unanticipated. Aesthetic play is a medium. The interplay or mediation discloses perceptual understandings and practical wisdom living within the movement. Thus, aesthetic play asks all participants to live their lives in classrooms with greater sensitivity to education as a medium. Dewey identifies “sensitivity to a medium as a medium as the very heart of all artistic creation and aesthetic perception” (*AE*, 199). He notes that sensitivity to the intimacy of relations that hold parts together is characteristic of artistic design. “Only when the constituent parts of a whole have the unique end of contributing to the consummation of a conscious experience, do design and shape lose superimposed character and become form” (*AE*, 117). This capacity to perceive relationships among parts seem akin to the aesthetic play struggled for by teachers and students. The ability to participate in teaching/learning situation as artists engaged in aesthetic play seems dependent on developing this capacity.

Aesthetic play engages participants in making sense of the world through involvement with it. Our sensibilities are the sources of our consciousness. Simultaneously, perception is exploration via the senses requiring sustained attention to the qualities in situations. Perception is interpretive because meanings and values are brought to perception by prior contact with the world. The thinking involved is an existential process—the interaction and exchange of self with the infinite complexities of the situation. Dialogue and participation is key to meaning making. The meaning made is neither subjective nor objective but an integral relation of both subjectivity and objectivity. This requires attention to the relations between qualities. Such qualitative thought requires the willing immersion of self in the situation, a situation that is cognizable by the senses. As Eisner emphasizes:

The eye is a part of the mind and the ability to read the qualitative world in which we live is the major avenue through which those forms we call thoughts are constructed. All thinking requires a content and that content emanates from our contact with the world. It is our sensory system that first provides the material we experience, reflect upon, and eventually manipulate.¹⁷

In other words, content means little without contact. Aesthetic play demands participatory thinking, thus, contact with subject matter is sought. Participating students talked of learning they retained and a greater belongingness to their thinking, as evidenced in care and concern for their work and the work of others. I noted a pride and growing sense of self as a thinker emerging in participating students. Seemingly, the power of aesthetic play is manifested through being inseparably bound up with the question of what it means to be human, insisting that within the making, creating act, participants dare look at the sense and the selves continually being made.

Aesthetic play requires all participants to remain faithful to the intricacies and intensities of human experience. Teachers and students continually improvised

within relations, adapting, building, and changing meaning. The indeterminate nature of aesthetic play assumes teaching/learning is complex and individual. All involved are oriented toward a sensitivity to the many relations present in teaching/learning situations and deliberately seek out fragility's presence in order to honor the existing complexity and individuality. Eisner explains, "What is mediated through thought are qualities, what is managed in process are qualities, and what terminates at the end is a qualitative whole."¹⁸ Discerning these qualitative relationships entails a faith. The qualitative interdependence depends on faith as a catalyst. This is faith understood as being in touch with context, finding accordance with lived experience. Such accordance with lived experience takes the form of continuous dialogues between self and other. These dialogues of faith ask participants to venture into the unknown with an audacity and tentativeness. Audacity is required to place value on entering into such dialogues of faith. Belief takes up purpose as something to be worked toward, rather than something that is necessarily present from the beginning. Tentativeness refers to the exposed, uncertain nature such participation demands. Commitment is required, grappling and questioning in the pursuit of meaning. Negotiating between audacity and tentativeness embraces these contraries as interactive and interconnected relationships. In this way, dialogues move back and forth, making a way in a constant exchange between self and situation. Jardine claims that the task of inquiry so conceived "is not to dispel this tension, but to live and speak from within it."¹⁹ Harboring within aesthetic play is an integral fragility with particular assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching and learning. These assumptions, values, and beliefs center on teaching as a call to respond to needs, desires, and interests of children.²⁰ Faithfully responding to this call necessitates centering/living with fragility as a productive power.

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