

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Aesthetic Practices and Adult Education

By Darlene Clover, Kathy Sanford, and Shauna Butterwick (Eds.)
(London, UK: Routledge, 2013, 136 pages)

Creating transformational learning experiences through aesthetic practices, though not a new idea, continues to be a fruitful area of investigation in adult education. The authors in this anthology draw heavily from two foundational education theorists: American pragmatist John Dewey and Brazilian educator Paulo Friere. Emerging from radically different social contexts, Dewey and Friere shared a belief in the idea that education is a tool for social change, in which tangible experiences inform the learner through the integration of mind and body. In his only book on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey states his basic premise: When you learn by participating in aesthetic experience, you enrich the process and the quality of learning (p. 122). Friere, too, put great emphasis on learning as doing, seeing the learner as a “co-creator” rather than a passive receiver (1972, p. 60). It is on this foundation, of direct experience as transformational learning and its impact on wider community practices of social justice and adult education, that the authors in *Aesthetic Practices and Adult Education* articulate their perspectives and diverse case studies.

The studies range across the topics of museum education, community arts practice, social justice, leadership, and mental health. While each chapter is notable for providing insight into a particular case study of how aesthetic practices have been integrated into an educational process within a specific context, all the chapters address, to some degree, the broader topic of “community arts engagement.” The authors analyze how adult learning can benefit from collective aesthetic practices, and they identify key issues within that area of questioning, including the relationship between the individual and the collective, the importance of embodied experience in transformational learning, and the relationship between collective aesthetic practices and social change.

Community, in the democratic context, implies a collective social identity that can unify and give voice to underrepresented people. Yet the collective can also oppress individual difference within a generalized identity. In the chapter entitled “Imagining and Engaging Difference in the Art Museum,” Kimberly F. Keith explores the tensions involved when museum educators and curators seek to represent “difference” to audiences, using objects, images, and narrative texts. Aesthetic experience in this context is often restricted to a passive visual experience

flowing from the museum to the viewer, creating a one-way message. Keith rightly acknowledges the roots of the authoritative museum's position in colonialism and builds her case study around the question of how museum educators can negotiate this terrain.

As a number of the authors note, one of the keys to resisting the oppressive tendency of one-way messages is through embodied experience, which subverts the abstracting forces of generalizations. Claudia Ruitenber in "Learning by Walking" and Greit Verschelden, Elly Van Eeghem, Riet Steel, Sven de Visscher, and Carlos Dekeyrel in "Positioning Community Art Practices in Urban Cracks" identify embodied experience as a mode of education in which individuals comprehend their relational existence and gain a sensory perception of the dialogue between social and environmental integration and personal autonomy. Friere's notion of the co-creator comes to the fore in these chapters, which explore what it means when embodied aesthetic experience is active and dialogical. In particular, these two chapters examine the ways in which public spaces provide rich contexts for emancipatory educational experiences and political struggles.

The relationship between aesthetic experience and social justice also emerges strongly in Carole Roy's chapter, "Why Don't They Show Those on TV?: Documentary Film Festivals, Media and Community." Roy looks at the way in which small, locally organized documentary film festivals have functioned to educate the public about lesser-known global social and political issues and struggles, offsetting Western mainstream media's lack of interest.

The significant transformational role that aesthetic experience can play in adult education is explored more specifically by Catherine McGregor in "Art-Informed Pedagogy: Tools for Social Transformation." She argues for the possibility that aesthetic practices that provide a range of interpretations and require an intersubjective approach enhance learning through synthesis and identity formation. This can have a profound effect on the development of leadership and the integration of social justice principles into practices.

This idea of developing a new perspective through aesthetic experience is further explored within the context of mental health by Mok Escueta and Shauna Butterwick in "The Power of Popular Education and Visual Arts for Trauma Survivors' Critical Consciousness and Collective Action." The authors analyze the ways in which collective visual-arts-based practices can be effective tools for recovery from trauma by bringing the structural societal elements that perpetuate trauma into the light, where they can be addressed in communion rather than in isolation. Through dialogue and participation, the group can actively work toward meaningful change.

Bringing such diverse perspectives together in one volume is this anthology's strength because it connects different disciplines through a shared approach to learning that incorporates aesthetic practices and addresses foundational interdisciplinary questions. For those who are new to this field of inquiry and its theoretical underpinnings, an introduction providing both a historical context for the development of adult education theory and a discussion of aesthetics across disciplines (by no means a simple transfer of stable ideas and definitions) would have been welcome. I suspect, however, that few readers will approach this volume with the intention of reading it cover to cover and will instead be searching out individual authors' contributions. Readers who persevere through several chapters will note the bridge of understanding across disciplines that begins to take shape. Those who are familiar with the underlying theories will find a collection of significant studies in this anthology.

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REFERENCES

Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York, NY: Minton, Balch.

Friere, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin.