

From Aesthetic Crisis to Consummation in Social Justice Education

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In “Putting the World in Peril: A Deweyan Aesthetic of Crisis in Social Justice Education,” Peter J. Nelsen advances a new theoretical framework for understanding the work of social justice education. Based on a careful analysis of John Dewey’s philosophy, Nelsen articulates how Dewey’s notions of growth and aesthetic consummation can be utilized in social justice education to facilitate socially just growth. This analysis offers critical insight into social justice education and, at the same time, advances research that engages social justice more broadly, by offering of a vision of how we can work toward a more just way of being with one another.

Growth, for Dewey, begins in a state of disruption. And in the context of social justice education, which intentionally seeks “to disrupt patterns of thinking, commonsense beliefs, and even understandings of our place in the world,” Nelsen offers that this disruption leads to a crisis in which students’ worlds are put in peril. But it goes without saying that growth does not necessarily fall out of every crisis. And Nelsen points out that this crisis in social justice education runs the risk of finding resolution “in emotionally satisfying ways that ultimately inhibit socially just growth,” inadvertently reinforcing “the very dynamics we seek to disrupt.” Thus, Nelsen seeks to address how we might “create conditions that encourage growth and further engagement especially through periods of crisis.”

Confronting the realities of social injustice puts us all - as organisms embedded within our environments - in a state of discord with our surroundings. It is for this reason that I refer to the crisis Nelsen describes in the social justice education classroom to be an *aesthetic* crisis. Indeed, this is an aesthetic crisis and it requires an aesthetic solution that will restore equilibrium through a reorganization of material conditions in our environments along with a reorganization of our habits. The full richness of this substantial kind of reorganization comes to the fore in Dewey’s discussion of aesthetic experience. Thus, on Dewey’s account, aesthetic consummation is “a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being - one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence.” This initiates “a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it the potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle.” Dewey continues saying: “The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew.”¹

Thus, Nelsen charts a novel and extremely significant path forward for social justice education, pushing “beyond a focus on new evidence and argumentation as a way to resolve ... crises,” and calling our attention to the particulars of the classroom context in which crisis emerges. This involves recognizing that students are responding to “the very particulars of *this group* and *this conversation* and *this environment*.” Engaging the real social context in which crisis emerges is important because, following Dewey, it is the material conditions of our environments that we

use for growth as we reorganize objects external as well as internal to us, so that we can better harmonize with our surroundings.

At this point, however, I need to pause - just briefly - because it is at this point that I can mark a place where my view diverges ever so slightly from Nelsen's analysis. Nelsen continues by saying that these very particular conditions of the classroom environment "can be deadened, or they can be experienced aesthetically, and the difference rests upon the *energy* brought into the interaction."² In one sense, I understand how this is true. It takes a lot of energy to stay engaged with these material conditions and to continue to work toward aesthetic consummation. But I also think there is energy in checking out, in deadening these very particular conditions, and especially in deadening our visceral reactions to them. What I mean is, when we deaden our responses to our environment, we *swallow* our impulses. And it takes *energy* to do this - to look the other way. Dewey addresses this in *Human Nature and Conduct* when he says: "Suppression is not annihilation. 'Psychic' energy is no more capable of being abolished than the forms we recognize as physical. If it is neither exploded nor converted, it is turned inwards, to lead a surreptitious subterranean life."³

My point is simply that the difference between deadening interactions and experiencing them aesthetically does not rest on the amount of *energy* brought into the interaction, but rather rests on something else. Thus, instead, I propose the difference rests on a capacity to use such interactions aesthetically. Yet, this suggestion stands at odds with another point in Nelsen's analysis when he says: "The aesthetic, then, is accessible to all people throughout their interactions and experiences with specific objects and in specific contexts." Admittedly, Dewey would likely agree with this statement and, indeed, this is the very idea that motivated Dewey to write *Art as Experience*, a key aim of which is to recover "the continuity of esthetic experience with the normal process of living."⁴ However, as much as I admire *Art as Experience*, I do not think Dewey's account goes far enough in recognizing or remedying the full weight of the problem, and it is for this reason that I turn to the psychoanalytic account of D. W. Winnicott in order to better understand the significance of this problem.

The problem, which I propose is a lack in our capacity to use our interactions and experiences aesthetically, lies at the heart of Winnicott's psychoanalytic theorizing. Following Winnicott, the inability to access the aesthetic realm is actually a quite common problem - one that originates developmentally in our early interactions with the world.⁵ The point here is that, while this experiential realm is always at least potentially accessible in theory, practice reveals that many of us suffer much of the time from an inability to access it. And it is precisely for this reason that Winnicott developed a therapeutic approach that aimed to develop this capacity in patients when it was lacking.⁶ Accordingly, I propose that in adopting Nelsen's account of using Dewey's philosophy of growth and aesthetic consummation in social justice education, we also expand upon Deweyan aesthetic theory by drawing on Winnicott's psychoanalytic insights to guide the process of working through aesthetic crises.

Doing so, I believe, would more richly draw out the role of the teacher, who is tasked with creating the conditions necessary for mitigating a limited capacity to use interactions and experiences aesthetically. Considering the role of the teacher

marks an unnamed - but nonetheless integral - aspect of Nelsen's account, as there is little doubt that Nelsen is calling for anything less than truly masterful, and indeed artistic, teaching. In order to facilitate this kind of aesthetic growth through consummation, teachers will need acute skills of judgment and a deep relational attunement to students. This requires a teacher that can respond effectively, within a moment, in order to offer students the necessary amount of support while also sustaining the requisite amount of tension. This dual function of providing support while also sustaining tension is necessary for establishing an environment in which students are both able to and urged to stay engaged in this aesthetic process. And much like a musical conductor coordinating many different voices, comprised of many different capacities and timbres that are prone to collide and conflict at times, the social justice educator will be tasked with managing and negotiating a conglomeration of crises, all while aiming to support aesthetic consummation for the class as a whole and for each student, individually. An enormous feat for any teacher, to be sure, this implicates a vision of masterful teaching in order to achieve aesthetic consummation through socially just growth.

In linking social justice education with Dewey's philosophy, Nelsen advances social justice education in significant ways by adding new dimensions to our understanding of the work of social justice education. In particular, Nelsen's analysis of Deweyan growth offers us a clearer picture of what it is we are aiming for. Thus, socially just growth involves an increase in our capacity to keep on growing as we are impacted by and make impact within our environments, such that our interdependence upon one another and the groups in which we are embedded become more substantial and interconnected. And in order for this kind of growth to come to fruition, I believe Nelsen makes an invaluable contribution in calling attention to the aesthetic dimension. Theorizing about the aesthetic dimension, in particular, may help us to better understand the complexities of working through the aesthetic crisis inherent in social justice education. And this recognition, in turn, may help us to better support the conditions for amelioration from aesthetic crisis to consummation in social justice education.

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 10, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 23.

2. Emphasis added.

3. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924, Vol. 14*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 109.

4. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 16.

5. For a fuller account of this process, see: Jane Blanken-Webb, "The Difference Differentiation Makes: Extending Eisner's Account," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 1 (2014): 55-74.

6. D. W. Winnicott, "Playing: A Theoretical Statement," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971/2008), 51.