

## Drawing on Derrida: Aesthetic Practice as a Displacement of Learning

Margaret E. Manson  
*York University*

Maxine Greene describes the Deweyan “moment of consummation” that precedes “the elaboration [and] discovery of the new” as defining aesthetic experience.<sup>1</sup> For John Dewey, an experience that is aesthetic “possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement.”<sup>2</sup> My interest, however, is in the nature of an aesthetic that is characterized by disjunction and dissonance, which can be termed a disruptive aesthetic. In this regard, Jacques Derrida’s conception of the supplement’s “cumulating function” that generates a multitude of signifiers, at times confounding in their relation to what has been apprehended and imagined, provides a productive reference point from which to begin to consider how, and in what form, aesthetic education is important to teacher education. I argue that inserting the arts as an aesthetic supplement (in a Derridean sense) to curriculum in teacher education opens up opportunities to learn about the nature of pedagogy and its capacity to “address the discursive process of producing knowledge and the strategies for interpreting the knowledges that can and cannot be produced.”<sup>3</sup> At the dialogic intersections of knowledge production and interpretation, the potential offered by the aesthetic supplement is for learners to become personally implicated in constructing knowledge. As they do so, the insights and understandings that emerge for them from encounters provoked by the intervention of the aesthetic supplement have significant implications for their own pedagogical practices.

My discussion here concerns the practice of “Judith,” a professor teaching in an undergraduate program for preservice teachers, who integrated visual art into a course on reflective practice.<sup>4</sup> As part of her course, Judith designed a visual art workshop through which to engage teacher candidates in a process of reflection focused on an unanticipated experience that had occurred during their school-based practicum, and which subsequently became a significant pivotal moment of insight into everyday practice. Judith’s purpose was to inquire into how the integration of visual art into her course of study could offer learners ways of encountering, interpreting, and producing new knowledge about teaching and learning. During the workshop, teacher candidates designed and assembled a visual art panel that documented their pivotal experience, and attempted to communicate to others the insights they had gleaned through the liminal nature of their pivotal experience. I focus in particular on the panel produced by one teacher candidate, “Brian,” to illustrate how Derrida’s notion of the play of signifiers, and the resulting indeterminacy of interpretation that he discerned in the movements of signifier and signified, defines aesthetic experience as arising from a Derridean process of disruption and displacement rather than a Deweyan process of consummation. This realization prompts a consideration of the kinds of pedagogical contexts that allow for the

development and clarification of the relation between meaning and doing from within the structures of a disruptive aesthetic. I describe below the nature of a disruptive aesthetic and consider how this conception of aesthetic experience shapes contexts through which the new, the yet-to-be-known, emerges through aesthetic practices of meaning making. I draw here on Derrida's theorizing of the work of the supplement in relation to what I am calling an aesthetic supplement.

#### THE AESTHETIC SUPPLEMENT

Derrida discerned the structures of the supplement through his attention to the problems of representation that arise with the supplementation of written words for spoken ones. Writing, he notes, takes the spoken word and transcribes it into a different representational form. Ordering and presenting oral thought in written form, one that effaces the speaker as it were, makes writing a necessary addition (supplement) to speech. For Derrida this move is "the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent."<sup>5</sup> Such is the structure of the supplement that in deferring meaning to the written word, it conceals the tension that arises between what the supplement makes present — the thoughts that are expressed through the written word — and what the supplement signals to as being absent — the spoken words that originally gave rise to the thoughts being expressed and represented in writing. In addition, the need to supplement the written word for the spoken word suggests that something is lacking from the latter, that the written word in some way enriches the spoken word. The simultaneous existence of presence and absence, and the perception that what is lacking must be added to or replaced, are qualities of the supplement's structures.

In fact the most productive aspect of the supplement might be its ability to add itself as "a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techne*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function."<sup>6</sup> However, in this process of substituting the written word for the spoken word, of exercising its apparent "fullness" of expression and representation, the supplement creates (defers to) a new form which is taken to be fully representative of what it signifies. The written word (signifier) stands for the spoken word (signified). In effect the new form sustains the illusion that although the thoughts expressed in writing are separate from, and may differ from, those expressed in speech, they are in fact the same. What concerns Derrida is this shift in attention from what is originary or subjective (the ideas and meanings gestured to by speech as the original signifier) to the sign or object that is created (the written word that is added to the originary and comes to represent it as signifier).

Two problems related to the function of the supplement immediately present themselves. One concerns the plurality of meaning that is launched by the signifying function of the sign; the other concerns the object that has come into being and is taken as representative of the originary. As Greene explains, "what is called the 'signifier' (either a meaningful spoken sound or a meaningful mark inscribed on a page) is what we can be sure of, while the 'signified' remains a possible or open question." She adds that "once we give priority to the signifier and realize that words

refer to and relate to other words, not to some objective world beyond, meanings may proliferate and grow richer.”<sup>7</sup> However, as meanings proliferate, Derrida perceives that the representative signs or objects they produce, or to which they have a relation, are in danger of capturing and deferring our attention. Instead of fulfilling a promise of plenitude in terms of the fullness of *presence* of meaning expressed by the signifier, the supplement in the second instance “intervenes or insinuates itself” so that the meanings that have been added or replaced serve to efface (make absent) the original meanings from which they arise. This tension becomes significant to my analysis below of the ways in which the panel (object) created by Brian threatened to efface the complex of intuitions that he attempted to represent in visual form. As Derrida notes, “Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish *itself*, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.”<sup>8</sup>

What Derrida suggests here is that the proliferation of meaning is both provoked and governed by the sign. Also suggested by the movement of meaning described earlier is the impossibility of “any fixed objective meaning”<sup>9</sup> to be recovered from the sign by means of interpretation. For Richard Shusterman, what becomes significant is that meaning “can never be perfectly preserved or replicated by an interpretation, which will always introduce its contextual difference.” Rather than being seen as “a distinct object,” meaning and meaning making are “essentially relational and inextricable from human social practices.”<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, the imperative to attach specific meaning to the materials of experience and insight appears as a gloss that threatens to limit the possibilities of learning. By seizing instead on the intimation of absence presented by the signifier, it might be possible to work with and through the tension of presence (a given understanding) and absence (meaning that is connoted) to force open those spaces in which the absent might be sought. In other words, a deliberate search for meaning makes use of the potential of the supplement to approach what is absent, rather than repress or replace (efface) it. The pedagogical opportunities that I perceive in this movement from presence to absence concern the potential for gleaning and producing knowledge from within the meanings that are proliferated through the signifiers that represent the potential relation between experience and knowing. As an “addition” (in the form of the visual art panel I describe below), the supplement’s potential is to “double” one’s sense of knowing and understanding by moving through the signifier to the accumulated meanings it has generated, a movement which, in turn, begins to reframe the contexts in which meaning originated.

#### THE MOVEMENT OF MEANING

In returning to the art workshop in which Brian’s panel was produced it is useful to recall that what Judith sought in the visual panel was an artwork that communicated the understandings and insights that had emerged for teacher candidates from their critical reflection on a specific liminal experience of classroom practice. The intent was to make the subjective meanings they had gleaned explicit as objectified form in order to communicate them to others. What was called for here was an art object that marked a moment in the time of thinking. What also appeared to be

implicit in this exercise was an expectation that teacher candidates could contain their experience and a careful analysis of its import in the form of a representative visual panel. It subsequently became apparent that Judith's tangible concern about producing an art object that abstracted, defined, and communicated experience in presentational form appeared to overwhelm an aesthetic process in which teacher candidates became engaged. This was a process characterized by liminality, the generation of images and symbols, and artistic forms of interpretation and representation, which I regard as aesthetic ways of knowing that can be brought to bear upon inquiries into teaching and learning and the complex nature of meaning making. As used here, the term liminality describes the insightful moment of intuitive recognition that reveals new meanings of import for the perceptive learner. Images are symbolic forms of expression that connote and represent meaning, giving form to and expressing understandings gleaned through aesthetic interpretation and artistic representation, in this case, as Brian worked within the disciplinary formations of visual art to produce his panel. His interpretive and self-reflexive work held the promise of transforming his understanding of elements of his own practice as he began to draw upon the potential knowledge he had glimpsed in a liminal moment. And yet, as will be seen below, the incommensurate nature of Brian's efforts at meaning making became mired in his initial inability to discern the significance of his disparate collection of images.

#### BRIAN'S NIKE PANEL

Brian's panel comprised a sheet of yellow poster paper on which he had pasted a handful of images cut out of a magazine. These included images of running shoes and sports clothing and a larger representation of the Nike brand symbol. On encountering his panel, Judith had no idea what his pivot point might be. During the conversation she had with Brian he told her that one day a child came to him in the school yard, put one foot forward clearly displaying the Nike logo, and said, "See, I've got the same shoes as you!" The child briefly recounted how he'd persuaded his mother to buy him shoes like those worn by his student teacher. It became evident to Judith that Brian suddenly and irrevocably became aware of the unspoken impact of his choice of clothing and shoes on impressionable children, and of how his own participation in a culture of brand names might have influenced a child who appeared to have identified with him. The fact that this influence had economic consequences for a family also struck him forcefully. While he himself had given no thought to his shoes, a child had interpreted them with particular meaning that Brian had never considered. Brian's realization, and the shock of its import, was not visible in his panel; it could not be interpreted in its complexity from the visual information offered by the panel. The scattered and arbitrary nature of the layout of the images arranged around the central Nike logo lacked a coherence of design that might have provided some links with the nature of his insight. It became necessary for Brian to include in his panel a brief written explanation that conveyed to others the explanatory details he had provided for Judith.

What I wish to address specifically in relation to the panel Brian produced is how conceptions of the aesthetic supplement, set against the notions of a documentation

of experience with which Judith and her students were working, might attend to the danger perceived by Derrida in relation to the manner in which the supplement is added to and replaces that which it supplements. Recall that what concerns Derrida is the shift in attention from what is originary or subjective, in this case from the ideas and meanings contained in Brian's initial insight as the original signifier, to his panel as an objective form that represents the materials of insight and subsequently becomes the signifier. Derrida's thought cautions that instead of the shift in understanding being one that enlarges learners' understandings of the core topic under study (reflective practice in this case), it becomes one that captures their attention and transfers it to the visual representations of the understandings created through the visual art activity integrated into coursework. Thus the panel that Brian produced is in danger of becoming the object of attention and expression, instead of the more complex collection of perceptions and insights that emerged for him during his process of composing and creating his panel. Additionally, in searching for an inscription that explains and clarifies, an interpretation is chosen that at the same time threatens to close down on other possible interpretations.

Signaled here is the importance of understanding that each interpretation is based in a particular set of imperatives that are brought to bear on, and may exceed, the clarifying inscription, because they represent the values, traditions, and identifications that influence interpretation. On these grounds, any attempts to transcribe one's own meaning-making efforts and to choose among interpretations of an insight arising from a pivotal moment of experience become fraught with possibility realized or overlooked. The closure of statement (*this is what it was*) represented by Brian's panel defers attention from the possibilities generated by a closer examination of a liminal moment of learning, by threatening to overlook the insights and meanings that lay behind the images he had selected. The effacing of self that is implied by this unproblematic movement between external and internal states raises Derrida's concern about the ways in which meaning shifts and is erased in the movement of the supplement away from what is originary or subjective, toward the sign or object that is created, in effect the displacing of the signifier.<sup>11</sup> What is in danger of being lost in this displacement is the learner's ability to notice and articulate more fully the meanings to be made about and from their encounters with the world, on their own terms.

#### ENCOUNTERING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

I move here to examine more closely the threat of an erasure of Brian's newfound knowledge in order to seek out the possibilities gestured to by the signifiers contained in his panel. Thomas Mitchell examines the structures employed when working with mixed media, explaining that some forms of imagetext exhibit "the straightforward discursive or narrative suturing of the verbal and visual: texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground, and document the text."<sup>12</sup> These instances of a "conventional division of labor" produce a representative form in which the visual-verbal relationship generates a literal interpretation of experience. The symbols and structures that comprised Brian's panel, and the written text that clarified the insight

gained during the experience it represented, offered what appeared to be an unequivocal rendering of experience along with the learning and insight gained. Of greater interest in pedagogical contexts, however, is what the composite nature of the imagetext promises as “a kind of figurative excess.”<sup>13</sup> It is within the possibility suggested here that Brian’s panel begins to offer new pedagogical opportunities.

The images of clothing that comprised Brian’s panel, and the Nike logo in particular, point to the influence of symbolic representations and how they are read within and beyond the public domain of the classroom. The logo he selected to symbolize his insight is replete with meaning because of well-established connotations that have entered public mythology. Recalling Derrida’s caution that “the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself,”<sup>14</sup> it can be seen that the mythological power of the Nike symbol, flattened by its familiarity into a sign, readily supplements the more complex intuited meanings that initiated Brian’s thinking and process of meaning making. When functioning as a sign, the image threatens to constrain Brian’s thinking as it produces a set of meanings that has the potential to efface for others the significance of the pivotal experience he is attempting to represent. This became evident in what he recalled as being the initial revelation the experience offered him, the shock of discovering how personal choice and influence reached beyond the classroom in ways that left him feeling accountable for the financial impact the purchase of branded goods might have on a student’s family. As represented in his panel, Brian’s insight remained with the events that contributed to it, but his attempts at meaning making had not yet moved from an immediate and self-referential framework gestured to by the Nike logo (operating here as a sign), to an examination of the broader implications hinted at in his text.

In semiotic terms, Brian’s panel containing an *ad hoc* selection of items of clothing represents the possibility of a proliferation of meanings. Setting aside the fact that a lack of knowledge and experience in arts skills and techniques may have contributed to the somewhat incoherent layout of objects on Brian’s panel, that the panel left Judith, the viewer and evaluator of his work, confused as to what it was intended to express, draws attention to meanings that might be retrieved from what exceeded the arbitrary collection of images gathered around the Nike sign. This returns me to Derrida’s attention to the ease with which the original signifier of insight becomes displaced by ensuing signifiers that seize our attention and threaten to limit the articulation of insight and understanding. Significant here is the need to sustain the opening or aperture that Mitchell has discerned, so that insights can be more fully mined for meaning. In this regard, what emerges is that in attempting to explain the meanings that lay behind the images he selected, Brian began to engage with a more detailed inquiry through the juxtaposition of image and word in the form of image/text, which is “not a template to reduce these things to the same form, but a lever to pry them open. It might be best described, not as a concept, but as a theoretical *figure* rather like Derrida’s *différance*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation.”<sup>15</sup> The effect of image/text is to disrupt the mythology of the logo. The written commentary deconstructs the meaning of the sign, moving it into the realm of Brian’s thinking and attaching it to a set of meanings associated

with ideological understandings about the teacher's position as role model. In this detachment from myth and movement to ideological understanding, the sign is capable of acting as a symbol and it is the addition of written words that makes this movement possible. In summary, when interpreted by viewers of the panel as a sign, the Nike logo threatens to erase the complex of feeling and cognition that addressed Brian. Thought of as a symbol, it holds the potential of expressing Brian's subjective understandings and their associated implications in a connotative form that exceeds the limits of the sign.

What now becomes evident is that in attending to the demands of inference and implication, Brian's interpretive response cannot be limited to his earlier empathic identification of burdening parents with the economic consequences of his influence. In their unquestioned form, self-consciousness and empathic response return one to the limitations of personal knowledge and experience. The gaps or apertures that disrupted Brian's understanding were made visible by what appears to be the inadequacy of his response to the ways in which an everyday encounter with one of his students unsettled his understandings of self. As his meaning making began to unravel, the glimpse Brian's insight offered into the potential nature of a teacher's influence on students and their families promised to open up an intuited sense of alterity<sup>16</sup> that might move him from a self-referential realization to a more critical engagement with what it means to be a role model. The disruption of self-perception, which was only hinted at in the explanatory text he attached to his panel, introduces a range of possible meanings and interpretations from which learning might emerge, with the productive potential of redirecting his attention to the unexpected sense of vulnerability he encountered on perceiving self as interpreted by others. On these terms the pivotal experience, and its iteration in the panel he created, provoked for Brian an encounter with what self-consciousness means for a role model. His ensuing shock of recognition revealed a need to think through the ways in which self is represented and interpreted in both conscious and unconscious ways. Mitchell's notion of an "aperture," that is capable of opening up "a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation,"<sup>17</sup> suggests the possibility of gleaning further knowledge from the incommensurate nature of Brian's panel that arises from within a perceived lack of coherence between disparate images and the shock of insight.

#### KNOWING AND LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

When considering the conditions of disjuncture and displacement from which learning might emerge, what becomes significant is the necessity of articulating more fully the implications that address learners. The point to be made is that the ways in which such openings are framed and made possible by particular forms of aesthetic disruption have the potential to result in the production of knowledge about teaching and learning. For example, how might Brian's concern about the consequences of his unconscious actions be reconstituted in order to raise questions about the nature of one's interactions with others and associated implications for practice? Brian chose to read the child's declaration as representing his influence on a family decision, but further inquiry may have revealed that the child was using a choice of shoes, made independently, as a way of establishing a relation with the teacher

candidate. Considering and pursuing a broader range of interpretations could help Brian articulate more fully an understanding of the complex dynamics of teacher and student relations that draws on the implications that unexpectedly addressed him about what it might mean to be in a position of influence.

Dewey states that intellectual knowledge is produced through modes of thinking that attach concepts and meanings to experience, and that practical knowledge is gained from an individual's interactions with events and objects in their environment.<sup>18</sup> However, it is also necessary to acquire knowledge beyond one's own experience through a reflective process that synthesizes the intellectual and practical to produce the professional sets of understandings, values, and beliefs that constitute a personal ideology and have the capacity to sustain one's becoming a teacher. For Deborah Britzman the theorizing that arises from personal experience is "a form of engagement with and intervention in the world."<sup>19</sup> Thus, attempting to realize new understandings significant to the professional development of new teachers demands working with what is gestured to, beyond the kind of organizing insight at which Brian arrived in his visual and semantic iterations.

I return at this point to the qualities of disruption and displacement that characterize the aesthetic supplement to emphasize the opportunities it offers for learning from and about the dialectical exchange between the having of an experience and the meanings that emerge from an experience. The new knowledge that addressed Brian emerged from aesthetic processes made possible by the qualities of disruption and displacement that characterize the aesthetic supplement. Specifically the work of the aesthetic supplement lies in the transformational qualities of learning experiences that move through encounters with slippage, incoherence and evasion, and insist on engagement with the materials of the surplus that are glimpsed in the liminal moment. By seeking out the liminal space between presence and absence that marks the limits of knowing, and engaging with aesthetic ways of knowing, this transformational process has the capacity to change a learner's perception of the complex processes of teaching and learning, at the same time as it changes what is known of these processes. The pedagogical purpose is to provoke new relations of thought and understanding within the processes of questioning and reconceptualization that characterize encounters with what is yet to be known.

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1. Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 75.

2. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr. New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 38.

3. Deborah Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 38.

4. Names (Judith and Brian) are pseudonyms.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144.

6. *Ibid.*



7. Maxine Greene, "Epistemology and Educational Research: The Influence of Recent Approaches to Knowledge," in *Review of Research in Education*, ed. Linda Darling-Hammond (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 1994), 446.
8. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 144–5 (emphasis in original).
9. Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth, Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 67.
10. *Ibid.*, 67–8.
11. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 145.
12. W.J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 94. Mitchell "employ[s] the typographic convention of the slash to designate 'image/text' as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term 'imagetext' designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text;" 89 n. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 95.
14. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 144–5.
15. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 106 (emphasis in original).
16. Britzman defines alterity as "the idea that one can only know the self through relationships with others," in *Practice Makes Practice*, 12.
17. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 106.
18. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 55.
19. Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice*, 55.