

How ought we defend aesthetic education?

D'Olimpio, Laura

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How Ought we Defend Aesthetic Education?

Laura D'OLIMPIO | ORCID: 0000-0003-0797-6623

Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education, School of Education,
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
l.dolimpio@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Defending aesthetic education is a vital task and the reasons we offer to justify the arts on the curriculum matter. I offer a philosophical argument for the necessity of aesthetic education for all school-aged students on the basis of its distinctive value, which is the aesthetic experiences the arts afford. It is aesthetic experience that is distinctive to the arts and a vital component in the flourishing life. As educators we have a duty to introduce our students to elements of a fulfilled and enjoyable life, which, I claim, includes the multiple and various arts and their associated aesthetic experiences.

Keywords

aesthetic education – aesthetic experience – value – arts education – flourishing

Defending aesthetic education is a vital task and the reasons we offer to justify the arts on the curriculum matter. The arts at all levels of study, from pre-primary through to high school, through to tertiary educational institutions are experiencing declining student numbers as the push towards subjects with a direct vocational correlative, and accompanying economic benefits, take precedence in our society. Too often we see the arts being squeezed by an increased focus on science, engineering, technology and mathematics (STEM) subjects, further borne out by funding cuts to the arts and a public and political rhetoric that does not seem to value them.

As such, there is a need to argue for why the arts and arts education is valuable, for their own sake, as well as for the positive contributions they can and

do make to society. Many artists and art teachers seek a defence of the arts and of aesthetic education that rests upon its essential nature or intrinsic value. We must ask what distinctive value the arts and aesthetic education offer – to students and in society. However, I also note the positive benefits they have instrumentally, contributing to other goods in society and to the lives of individuals.

My main aim in this short contribution is to briefly make and defend a philosophical argument for the necessity of aesthetic education for all school-aged students on the basis of its distinctive value. When it comes to arts education, I use the term 'aesthetic education' because it includes theories of art alongside the skills and techniques involved in making artworks and learning how to appreciate and critique works of art. It must also be noted that high quality education in the arts must be supported by good educational and governmental policy, quality resourcing and teacher training in order to be practically effective.

The defence I offer of aesthetic education is in terms of aesthetic experience. It is aesthetic experience that is distinctive to the arts and aesthetic experience is a vital component of a flourishing life. I define 'art' as an object that is intentionally created by a person or persons ('the artist') with the primary function or purpose of producing an aesthetic experience for those who engage with it. Such an object is created and received in a context because it is a human endeavour. I define 'aesthetic experience' in empirical terms, following John Dewey (1934), as, simply, an experience with aesthetic content: 'i.e., an experience of an object as having the aesthetic features that it has' (Shelley, 2017). I here also draw upon Monroe Beardsley (1982: 81) in claiming that an aesthetic experience results when one's mental activity is concentrated on the 'sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object' (i.e. an artwork, performance, or natural beauty such as a sunset or lush forest or the beach) which brings pleasure to the perceiver.¹

For an art object to produce an aesthetic experience, there are three main factors to consider: the skill with which the artist has executed the work of art, the art object itself and how it is displayed, and the attitude of the receiver of the work. Aesthetic experience depends upon an open and receptive mode of attention, but contextual features may also invoke or interrupt an aesthetic experience. If an artwork fails to elicit an aesthetic experience, this may be due to the lack of artist skill or execution, the context in which the artwork is displayed (which may include socio-historical or ethical factors (see D'Olimpio, 2020a)), and/or the attitude of the receiver of the artwork. Each of these

1 This is not to say that all art objects or objects that produce an aesthetic experience must be pleasant or beautiful.

elements; the skill of the artist, the presentation or display of the art object, as well as the reception of the work (including, specifically, the attitude of the audience) requires a form of learning, training or education.

Given schools have an important role to play in helping prepare young people for their adult lives, it is crucial they should consider how best to equip students with the means to achieve a flourishing life. It is on these grounds I defend arts education as compulsory across the curriculum. One necessary but by no means sufficient component to the flourishing life are experiences that afford enjoyment and that transcend the ordinary and the banal. Aesthetic experiences found when engaging with art afford emotions such as the sublime, wonder, shock, and awe, and offer opportunities for meaning-making that are creative, innovative, and generative (D'Olimpio, 2020b). Aesthetic experiences include elements of both cognition and feeling or emotion and also involves the imagination. Aesthetic experiences possess a phenomenological quality that includes being absorbed, focussed and open and receptive to the object under contemplation, with a curiosity and excited expectation as to what may be revealed through one's engagement with (and perception of) the object. Such aesthetic experiences elevate one's experiences in life beyond mere existing, towards flourishing.²

One objection to my account may be that this induction into experiencing and appreciating aesthetic experiences is not unique to art and to artworks. I have already allowed for the fact that we may undergo such enjoyable experiences through our appreciation of natural beauty. As such, this does not preclude environmental education being useful in the same way: to enhance one's receptivity towards nature and engender aesthetic experiences. However, sublime natural beauty is less accessible for many schools in urban areas³ and environmental education is often connected to issues of sustainability, scientific understanding and ethics. Particularly given the climate crisis and its associated environmental impacts, the focus of environmental education is only partially dedicated to enjoying nature and, as such, it is not as well suited to our purposes as art and aesthetic education.

A separate defence of environmental education is required which may include enjoying aesthetic experiences, yet this is unlikely to be its central argument. Ultimately it does not pose any difficulty for my argument by adding that we should also encourage people to gain more aesthetic experiences

2 See D'Olimpio, 2022 and 2021 for further detailed argumentation of these points.

3 Currently 55% of the world's population live in cities, with the United Nations estimating that by the 2050s more than two thirds of us will live in urban rather than country environments.

from enjoying nature. The flourishing life is made up of many components, including aesthetic experiences derived from nature and the arts. However, my focus on the arts is deliberate because artworks are specifically created to intentionally produce an aesthetic experience. Therefore, my defence of aesthetic education based on aesthetic experience allows for a defence of the arts to be made on the basis of art's distinctive value, and it is that distinctive value which is an essential component in the flourishing life. As educators, we must offer our students the opportunity to learn that they are entitled to such glorious experiences: to partake in them as well as to create them for others through the multiple and various art media available.

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