

Abstract

This thesis addresses two questions,

- What is my developing aesthetic in practice?
- How does working in this way support participative inquiry with others?

I examine how, through my presence as a facilitator using an action research approach, I become increasingly attuned to the aesthetic of play and the poetic in practice. I trace how this deepening sense of the participative nature of the aesthetic influences my practice.

The *aesthetic in practice* is defined as the sensory perceptions which flow from practice, and the thoughts and feelings that form around them. Aesthetic knowing is shown to be located on a spectrum, from the intrinsic aesthetic embedded in everyday experience, to the expressive aesthetic in arts-based processes.

I contextualise my account through autoethnographic writing. I examine changes in my ontological and epistemological viewpoint that accompanied a move from the positivist practice of management training, to participative inquiry based on action research approaches. My theoretical framework derives from Bateson's participative worldview and from phenomenology, particularly Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty. I describe my inquiry methods as an iterative cycle of analysis and sense-making, using journaling, auto-ethnography and photos, as a base-line.

The main research setting for this thesis is a day centre for people with learning disabilities. This took place in three stages. The first was a period of volunteering and personal orientation. The second consisted of a cooperative inquiry with front-line staff and the third, a media-based inquiry with staff and people with moderate learning disability. The aesthetic experience of participating with people there profoundly influenced my research.

My purpose in writing this thesis has been to understand better the transformational aesthetic engendered in reflexive and cooperative inquiry. This has led to a deepening of my own level of awareness of the improvisatory play and the intrinsic poetic that enlivens interactions. I have also explored how symbolic representation through expressive activities helps in re-imagining and sharing experience. Through this inquiry I have developed a participative practice in which more conscious aesthetic knowing supports processes of sense-making and change.

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Preface

Rumi, the Sufi poet, expresses his wonder at the destruction and re-creation of breaking through the old rules to the mystery of a new way.

The new rule

It's the old rule that drunks have to argue
and get into fights.
The lover is just as bad. He falls into a hole.
But down in that hole he finds something shining,
worth more than any account of money or power.

Last night the moon came dropping its clothes in the street.
I took it as a sign to start singing,
falling up into the bowl of sky.
The bowl breaks. Everywhere is falling everywhere.
Nothing else to do.
Here's the new rule: break the wineglass,
and fall toward the glassblower's breath ...'

Rumi, (1207-1273) translated by Coleman Barks (1995)

In this thesis I aspire to break some of my old rules and fall towards the glassblower's breath.