

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.

Prelude to Part A

This first part of the thesis aims to provide a scene-setter for my subsequent inquiry into the aesthetic in practice. Its four chapters offer the reader a contextual account of my personal, philosophical and methodological approach to this inquiry. It forecasts a story of transition or personal journey from a way of working based on a positivist view of training and development towards a very different world of participative practice based on action research.

This inquiry focuses on my growing preoccupation with aesthetic knowing, both as I experience it as an intrinsic phenomenon in daily life and also as an expressive activity resulting in artefacts and other imaginative processes.

Here's a brief guide to the four chapters:

Chapter 1– Introduction

This is intended as an overview of the starting point for this inquiry. I define the two questions, which this thesis addresses,

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

The chapter then tells the *backstory* of a changing practice. I introduce *Silver Street*, the name I have given in the interests of confidentiality to the location of much of my research, a day centre for people with learning disabilities. Also in this chapter the main theoretical framework of this research is outlined at ontological, epistemological and methodological levels. Reference is made to Bateson, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty and contemporary research into the aesthetics of organizations.

I define how I am using the term *aesthetic in practice* and feature the distinction I will make between the intrinsic and expressive dimensions of the aesthetic in practice. In particular I shall be inquiring into play and the poetic, in my analysis of practice. As my approach to this inquiry is based on action research, I explain why participative facilitation of cooperative inquiries attuned well with my need for a new epistemological basis for my work.

Chapter 2 – The inquiring ‘I’

Adopting an autoethnographic approach I have compiled a multi-voiced and reflexive account of my life during the period of this research. I also include pictures and stories relating to earlier stages in my life and comment on what they say to me about the inevitability of conducting this research.

The aesthetic nature of this chapter’s presentation echoes the larger purpose of this thesis.

Chapter 3 – A theoretical framework

This chapter describes a framework which will be drawn on in thinking about the aesthetic in practice throughout the rest of the thesis. A participative worldview is outlined with reference to Abram, Wheatley, Capra and Skolimowsky. The main focus though falls on the work of Bateson and his concept of an ecology of *mind*, which he understood to be a living information flow in a system. His concept of the *news of difference* as the point where learning occurs will be drawn on later in the thesis in analysing practice experience.

I then describe how I found a growing affinity with phenomenology and reference this through Heron and Reason’s concept of a *Subjective-Objective* participation with the world. The main focus here is on the work of Merleau-Ponty and his vision of returning to ‘the things themselves’ and embodied knowing through which, he argues, we discover in all other objects the miracle of expression.

The chapter concludes with definitions of the key theoretical concepts of action research that I will be drawing on as a frame for understanding my developing practice in participative inquiry.

Chapter 4 – Inquiry methods

I start by defining the nature of this inquiry in order to show how the methods I have developed attune to it. The themes of play and the poetic are seen as lying at the centre of the inquiry. This dictated inquiry methods which echo this aesthetic. Intrinsic and expressive dimensions of the aesthetic are described and the major themes of play and the poetic are more fully defined.

Then an iterative process for the description, analysis and further sense-making of material is described and illustrated in use.