Aesthetic Sensibility and Creativity in Education. Through the experience of an Arts Integrated Project

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Abstract: After a brief glance into history, this article introduces comments on the current state of Research into the Arts and Aesthetic Education. Besides the learning of specific art skills in creative work, the authors focus on how the integration of the different arts can reinforce aesthetic sensibility and creativity as a main goal in Art Education. Reflection on the experience of an Art Education Project for Teacher Training leads the authors to the definition of crucial creative attitudes for Art Education Programmes, either in schools or art institutions.

Riassunto: Il saggio argomenta intorno allo stato attuale della ricerca nelle arti e nell’educazione estetica. Oltre alla valorizzazione dell’apprendimento di specifiche competenze artistiche nel lavoro creativo, l’attenzione è posta su come l’integrazione delle diverse arti possa, piuttosto, rafforzare la sensibilità estetica e la creatività, presentando e discutendo, nondimeno, l’esperienza di un progetto di educazione artistica nell’ambito della formazione degli insegnanti.

Keywords: Arts in Education, Aesthetic Education, Art in Teacher Education, Creative Attitudes.

1. Introduction: a glance into history

The theme of Aesthetic Sensibility in Education takes us back to the Ancient Greece as our main cultural reference. The French historian Henri Marrou (1956) explains that the Greek curriculum, known as Paideia, was basically designed to educate both the body and the psyche by means of two specific subjects: gymnastics and music (with music including activities such as singing, playing instruments, dancing, poetry declamation). However, the highest aim above all in education was ‘contemplation’ as the union of knowledge and love for Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Contemplation was
not considered as a passive act of the intellect alone but it required also
the mobilisation of the will and heart. Catching, with mind and soul, the
brightness of truth, beauty or goodness in the contemplation of the world
was considered as the highest human achievement of a happy and good
life. For the ancient philosopher Aristotle, contemplation had to do with a
kind of acceptance or blessing towards the whole reality of the world with
no intention to manipulate it. Instead contemplation allowed a person to
come to know and love the world deeply (Pieper, 1965).

This ancient ideal of life has come down to us through the ages and was
probably at its peak during the Renaissance. However it was also empha-
sised during British and German Romanticism and Idealism, during the
XVIII century and part of the XIX century (Shelley, 2013). In opposition
to Rationalism, philosophers and artists at that time argued for the impor-
tance of beauty in life and nature, by enhancing aesthetic sensibility, taste
or feelings (Alonso-Geta, 2008, 14-18). It was the German philosopher
and poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe who, after his journey to Italy, proposed
the balance and harmony among Truth, Beauty and Goodness as a kind
of reconciliation between the romantic spirit and the classical world. His
friend Friedrich Schiller wrote Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind,
which extended this central idea to Aesthetics and Art Education.

Nowadays, a new emphasis on the Arts, Aesthetics, Beauty or Creativity
can be found in research on Education. This could seem contradictory with
the global emphasis placed on the subjects of Mathematics, Language and
Science, all valued as measurable ways to increase the quality of national
educational systems. However the crisis suffered in so many countries, not
only in their economies but more in terms of the need for social harmo-
ny, is demanding a new model of citizenship. Society needs people who
achieve not merely competence in certain kinds of privileged knowledge
but who are also aware and sensitive to social problems, individual or
minority marginalization, creative connections, and capable of generating
innovative solutions to a range of life dilemmas and issues. It is significant
that the contemporary psychologist Howard Gardner (2012), a leader in
Arts Education Research in the United States context, has titled his recent
work: Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed. Educating for Virtues in the Age
of Truthiness and Twitter.
2. Art and Aesthetic Education Research – the current state

General research in Arts Education fluctuates in between two main paradigms, among which a range of different and mixed approaches can be found. Basically, the distinction between these two lies in the focus they put either on the content of learning or on the learner itself. The former is usually motivated by what we generally know in the field of Art and Culture as Heritage Education and the preservation of knowledge. Within this paradigm the Discipline Based Art Education Approach (DBAE) is well known. It was developed in the 1980’s and 1990’s by the Getty Centre for Education in the Arts, whose programmes include art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art production. The underlying intention was to raise Art Education to the same level of other core disciplines. This approach is still popular in American classrooms and art institutions, although the research interest in it has lately decreased or at least evolved towards a holistic approach (Manley De la Cruz, Dunn, 1996). At the other end of the spectrum, the paradigm focussed on the learner is inspired by, amongst others, Victor Lowenfeld’s notions of a child-centred pedagogy (1954). Following this paradigm, a range of similar approaches, such as the so called self-expressive approach, the choice-based art education approach, or the TAB approach (Teaching for Artistic Behaviour), all emphasize the child’s creativity and consider students as artists. Criticism has put these two paradigms in opposition but school practice demonstrates how they can be developed in parallel or even combined as if in collaboration.

In that sense, there are other more recent approaches emerging in the middle of these two supposed poles. These new approaches depend not so much on the focus but mostly on the balance they achieve between both content and learner. These new approaches would include the Visual Culture Studies Approach and the Arts Integration Approach (whose closed variation would be the Interdisciplinary approach). As a reaction to the more conventional approach, which would only consider catalogued masterpieces of fine art, the former includes any other objects or artefacts created inside a culture to communicate some intention: advertisements, video recordings, movies, daily objects design, urban spaces, etc. The later deals with the integration of the arts in the whole curriculum so that any subject can be learned by including art work in its lessons whether the subject is mathematics, science, geography, literature, etc. A closed variation of this approach promotes the integration of the different arts (music,
visual art, drama, dance) to develop aesthetic education. The risk in this however, may be to restrict each of the specific arts because the attempt to fuse the arts together in a generalized aesthetic education approach may neglect respecting the fundamental foundations of each of the unique art disciplines (Manley De la Cruz, Dunn, 1996). The effort of preserving an aesthetic unity among all the different artistic elements or forms though does not necessarily mean that each of the specific arts has to lose its own identity, method or rules (Fleming, 2012, 96-98). On the contrary, their integration should reinforce the quality of each art’s practice at the same time as it enriches and promotes the aesthetic experience in education and in life generally.

In summary, and from an eclectic point of view, educational worth can be found in each of the different approaches and at the same time each approach can be combined in different ways. In this sense, there is no need to exclude visual culture or the creative behaviour of the student from a Discipline-Based approach that also allows art work to be developed across the whole curriculum. For instance, in a science lesson, a teacher might use a photograph from an advertisement to stimulate art criticism at the same time as promoting discussion about environment protection. Afterwards the students could express their own ideas by taking and submitting a new photograph on the matter, or even by changing this into a drama setting or into a video-recording. Alternatively, students in role as archaeologists through drama can acquire historical understandings (Idem, 20), or the careful ‘reading’ of visual images may aid children in the early stages of literacy, which is part of the justification of using picture books in the early years classroom (Arizpe, Styles, 2007).

While theoretical debates continue, the practice of teachers in Art Education has validated a more eclectic point of view (Greer, 1993). The Art Education Project for Teacher Training we are presenting here contributes to give evidence of these kinds of practices. Although the theoretical background above was taken into account from the starting point of the Project, we also decided to adopt a practical point of view by which the integration of the different arts in a creative process seemed to be much more appropriate for our purpose – that of encouraging a general aesthetic sensibility across all the arts. Students had to make an effort to ensure the different art forms involved worked together and converged into a unity. Each art form was guided by the same aesthetic intention yet at the same time it was important to preserve the rules and processes, together with the
methods or judgements of quality that would be specific to each of the arts. The Project was focused on opera and it was to be adapted and performed for child audiences. Opera was chosen because it gives the opportunity to integrate music, drama, dance, design and visual arts (Costa, 2010).

The project also gave trainees the opportunity to experience art production in a way that makes them become the creators during a whole artistic process. This in turn would qualify them to lead their own pupils through a similar aesthetic experience and collaborate with art programmes offered by other institutions out of the school context.

Indeed, the eclectic point and practical point of view adopted does not restrict Art Education to the formal school context but broadens it to non-formal settings such as museums, art centres and galleries, theatres, opera houses, cultural agencies, hospitals, etc. (Urpi, Costa, Font, 2011). With that, Trainees can be aware of how art and aesthetic education is pursued out of the classroom or even better, know how it connects classroom work with the offered programmes in cultural institutions. Their experience might encourage, collaboration between schools and cultural institutions that go beyond the conventional cultural visit of students attending an exhibition. Students may offer performances, research and art creation as a response to the input they may receive from art institutions. At the same time, art or cultural institutions may offer a context for the creative expression of what students have learned during the year.

3. The Aesthetic Integration of an Arts Education Project for Teacher Training

Once the context of the project has been explained, we will focus on its main goal and purpose and reflect on some of the practical results observed that relate to creative attitudes.

3.1. The context

Students enrolled at their four year degree course were gathered in little ‘opera companies’ according to their degree in Early Childhood, Primary, and Educational Studies and were given an opera to be adapted and performed for children audiences. In the pilot project developed in 2012, the
opers chosen were *Hansel & Gretel* for the Early Childhood Education 19 students, *The Barber of Seville* for the Primary Education 39 students and *The Little Chimney Sweep* for the Educational Studies 15 students.

Three subjects were involved in the Project and a total of 5 ECTS (from European Credit Transfer System) were to be assessed partially in each of them: 3 ECTS for Music Education, 1 ECTS for Visual Arts and 1 for Audiovisual Education (this included the Drama Education module). This meant that students attended 50 practical 1 hour lessons with lecturers and tutors, plus contributed 50 hours of practical coordinated study and activities by themselves. Although a clear distribution of content was programmed for each of the subjects, the project required close coordination among the lecturers themselves and between the lecturers and the students who were leading the sub-teams of each ‘opera company’ and who were in charge of scenery settings, costume, attrezzo, make-up and hairdressing, music adaptation, story adaptation, and performing.

Through the whole production process, different drafts and video recordings had to be submitted by the students, as the Project was based on the idea of maintaining a balance/tension between a process-centred and a product-centred approach. The former puts the accent on the creative steps and accomplishments during art production, not in its final result. The later emphasizes the final goal of the whole process which usually is the exhibition of a piece of art in front of an audience, so in our case, this was the final performance. The balanced approach adopted in the Project is based on the mutual reinforcement between a final goal and the intermediate steps taken to accomplish it. The pressure of a final performance can be seen positively as an encouragement to do good work attending to all details during the process. A final product gives sense to the process itself but it requires students and teachers to keep a balance so as not to be over-pressured by it.

### 3.2. Main goal and purpose

The main educational goal of the project was to encourage students to be aware of the aesthetic experience behind any art production and to relate this experience to life in general.

Aesthetic is the opposite of anaesthetic, which is the lack of sensibility (Eisner, 2009). Thus, aesthetic education, meaning the good development
of the senses, is seen as crucial for the whole person. It can be argued that this sensibility is the base of human feeling and knowledge (Abbs, 1989, 4).

When we say someone lives anesthetised to the world, we mean there is no sensibility in that person. There is no response. Life is put to sleep, not to perceive, to react, to feel, to know, nor to act.

The Arts Integrated Approach adopted in the project aimed to foster and enhance students’ aesthetic sensibility and creative attitudes as well as offer other more pragmatic or instrumental knowledge and specific art skills, which were taught independently from the project but put naturally in practice within it.

For the project, students were previously taught theoretical issues about aesthetics, beauty, art and creativity in education. Thus, the intention of it did not reside merely in the development of the specific art skills but also in the development of an understanding of the aesthetic sense of integrating all the arts in a unity. Integration does not mean only gathering together some elements but looking for a sense of unity and coherence between these elements. This unity or fusion is searched and perceived aesthetically, that is, with the senses, which includes the external human senses (sight, ear, taste, smell and touch) as well as the internal senses (imagination, memory, common sense). But in human life, sensibility and perception depend on both cognition and emotion, just as cognition and affection are basic for social and moral behaviour. In fact, all of these human concepts stay separate only when they are theoretically categorized. In real life experience, this separation does not occur because there is a close inter-relationship between all these human capacities when they work together in real life (Lombo, Giménez Amaya, 2013).

From a practical point of view, we can note how art experience illustrates this integration. For instance, when we watch a film, we have some feelings and thoughts attached, and sometimes they make us behave in a certain social or moral manner. In a similar way, this may happen with different arts: theatre, literature, visual arts, music. Consequently, it can be argued that Art Education, in both senses of art appreciation and art creation, can become our best opportunity to develop aesthetic sensibility and creativity because creative work requires this integration or unity among perception, cognition and action.

More than developing only technical skills for different art practice and appreciation, art education should pursue creativity as an ultimate goal. Art
is creative when human freedom is expressed or reflected in it. Therefore, we find beauty in art when we admire the materialized truth of free human action (Labrada, 1998), as we admire beauty in nature for its implicit and original creativity. This freedom in being creative should be defined not in the sense of having no limitations or restrictions for acting but in the sense of acting consciously, which means taking charge of one’s own decisions and makings, or taking the responsibility of human action according to an ultimate purpose (Altarejos, 2011, 125-126).

During the project, qualitative strategies such as observation, registration and questionnaires for students and lecturers were used to gather the data from which reflections and conclusions were argued, concerning the creative attitudes that became evident.

### 3.3. Creative attitudes for Art Education

After dealing with students’ first reaction and other behaviour that followed during this project, four creative attitudes were identified as positive results to be developed in creative team work.

#### 3.3.1. Facing external restrictions to achieve an internal purpose

The first of them has to do with the restrictions or limitations that we have just mentioned above and which students have to face to achieve an internal creative purpose.

Elliot W. Eisner’s idea of art education warns about the risk of thinking that art production and creativity has to do with having unlimited access to resources, means or possibilities (2002). Freedom in art creation does not necessarily imply free access to all possibilities as it could be supposed. He points out that putting some external restrictions to the execution of a creative work may challenge internal creativity, while having no limitations at all may paralyze students’ work. For example, all of us have the experience of cooking a meal with some specific ingredients, lack of others, kind of heating, specific kitchenware, specific guests or celebration. Sometimes these limitations do not come only from external conditions but also from the ones we feel inside. A lack of self-confidence, a pre-conception about one’s own abilities, may be considered hard limitations too for a creative work.
In the Project, the students’ first reaction to external limitations made them notice their own self-limitations. They expressed themselves in terms of feeling daunted and not confident they could attain the kind of work being demanded of them. Expressions like ‘I cannot sing’, ‘I cannot play any instrument’, ‘I cannot stage’ demonstrated an initial open rejection based on the limitations they felt by a lack of self-confidence and a lack of ability in art creation. This connects with the second attitude to be developed.

II. Risking self-efficacy and self-concept by accepting possible failures

A second creative attitude comes to solve this lack of self-confidence and it has to do with risking self-efficacy and self-concept by accepting possible failures.

According to Alasdair McIntyre (1999), human beings are vulnerable. This means we are sensitive to failure, injury or attack, and there is no self-defence against this human condition but by accepting one’s own vulnerability. This is crucial for human creativity because any creative process has much to do with taking risks. It does not mean that work has not to be carefully planned and executed but it does mean that creativity is not only a matter of decision making and task execution but also a matter of dealing with uncertainty and taking risks. During the creative process, not everything is under-control, only technical issues can be controlled more or less by command, but creativity has to do with being open to one’s own inner being and to that of others’ as well as developing ways of expressing this. And this means dealing with vulnerability.

Feeling resistance to this vulnerability made the students involved in the Project try to negotiate with the teachers in charge. They tried to reject the effort required to take the risk for creating a personal and singular work of art. As most of them had never gone to an opera concert nor even watched it on TV or you tube, this first rejection was translated in a demand to exchange the high challenge of performing an Opera for an easier and more familiar requirement: the performance of a Musical that they could know in advance by more commercial media.

For us, the requirements of an opera were not negotiable because of the aesthetic richness that an experience of an opera has in comparison with commercial musicals. Also, we wanted them to know and deal with the kind of educational offer they may find from Opera Houses, Theatres, Museums, etc. For instance, Royal Opera House in UK has interesting programmes for children, school teachers and educators, to approach opera
production in an educational context. Following this first initiative, the Royal Theatre in Madrid (Spain) offers similar programmes.

III. Relying on team support

A third attitude was identified in terms of the reliance on team support. The possibility to rely on others’ support appears when vulnerability has been recognized and accepted. According to McIntyre’s explanation of dependence as reliance (1999), human beings are not totally autonomous but they need one another. He defines the human being as a ‘Dependent Rational Animal’, adding the condition of dependence to Aristotle’s definition of mankind as ‘rational animals’. He explains that not only disabled but all the people should be considered as dependent because everyone in some way and at anytime is, has been, or will be, dependent on others. It belongs to the human condition.

This attitude appeared in the Project when students felt that restrictions were not negotiable and, at the same time, they recognized themselves vulnerable in front of the risky task for which they were going to be assessed. At this point they started caring about organizing and managing the whole process as they begun also to notice the compensation or benefit in their marks and their academic path. Gathered in large teams, they had to organize sub-teams with leaders who had to take different roles in the whole process. Once they had their first meetings, they submitted a first draft of the Opera Production and received our feedback, and it was at this moment when they started to feel capable, more self-confident and more committed to the task and their team? Self-confidence has to do with being supported by others in one’s own role or task.

IV. Opening and exposing intimacy to others as a gift of the self

Relying on others culminates necessarily in opening and exposing one’s own intimacy to others, and opening oneself to criticism and judgement. According to the notion of person set out by the Spanish contemporary philosopher Leonardo Polo, there is a unique and singular inner self in each of us which can be expressed as a gift to others and this becomes what he calls intimacy. In this context intimacy means deep knowledge and relationship to oneself and to others (Sellés, 2003). Contrary to what may be supposed, intimacy can be recognized only after this self-donation, rather than preserving it locked up inside. The individual person grows and develops their inner side when they are freely open, express or donate a
singular and unique inner side to the others. And that may be considered as well as human creation, meaning that every single life can be seen as a kind of ‘art work’ when its author acts accordingly to that constitutive freedom In this sense, students may learn that creativity has to do not only with art work but with the making of life itself, and that aesthetics and beauty can be both appreciated and pursued into human action and relationship, apart from only in objects or artifacts (Musaio, 2013). According to this idea, every human being can become an artist of his/her own life.

Depending on many factors related to individual conditions and also to the nature of the relationships in the team, this fourth attitude shows itself with more or less intensity. After students had dealt with team work difficulties, they could believe in the goal they were pursuing and take charge of their own Project or creation. Throughout the course of it they managed by themselves although they were supervised by the tutors, mostly at the very starting point and at the last stages leading up to the final performance.

4. Further argumentation and conclusions

Going back to the starting point of this paper and to the idea of contemplation that was conceived in ancient times—as the union of active knowledge and love for truth, beauty and goodness—, we may observe that a kind of similar contemplation can be fostered through Art and Aesthetic Education in modern times, when it pursues these kinds of creativity as its ultimate goal.

When Art and Aesthetic Education is more than a mere teaching-learning process for achieving technical skills in art practice or a refined aesthetic taste to appreciate art, and it includes creativity as a priority, then it offers great potential for human development.

Art and Aesthetic Education can make a difference to life experience by endowing it with qualities such as intense personal perception, attachment, singularity, authenticity. Thus it offers the opportunity to both appreciate human creativity in works of art and work creatively, not only in artistic work but in all kinds of work in human life. As teachers or researchers we should ask ourselves the following questions:

- Does Art and Aesthetic Education make us more sensitive (sensible) as human beings to the world? Do the arts develop human sensibility towards the diversity of the real world?
• Does Art and Aesthetic Education make us human beings better aware of life self-experience and the life experience of others? Does it prevent us becoming anesthetised to both our inner selves and the surrounding outside?

As we have seen in this project, dealing with creative team work helps students to get engaged with common goods and interests. At the same time students experience the aesthetic pleasure of self-achievement being materialized in concrete art performance.

In this sense, the need of an art education (in this extended meaning of an aesthetic education) would be crucial for citizenship education as well, because it widens the horizon of perception, interpretation and involvement in the existent world.

Finally, we would say that the convergence of all the arts—music, visual arts, video, drama, dance, cinema, literature—in integrated projects in which aesthetic sensibility and creativity are defined as an ultimate goal, may continue to be considered as a priority for research in education that deals with the complexity of real educational practice.

Authors’ Presentation:
Carmen Urpi is a Lecturer in the area of Theory and History of Education in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Navarra where she teaches courses related to Visual Arts and Aesthetics in Education for undergraduate and postgraduate studies (MA and PhD). She is tutor of the 4th year students in the Degrees of Pedagogy and Primary Education. Also, she has coordinated the Practicum Courses in the Degree of Pedagogy (Education). Her research spans the range of Arts and Aesthetics in Education from a wide approach which includes school formal context and other non-formal contexts such as museums or media, and the connections between them. She is particularly interested in how flexible pedagogies and autonomous structures may facilitate the integration of the arts to enhance aesthetic experience, and to promote collaboration between schools and other organizations or professionals related to the arts and creativity. Carmen has been visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge (UK), Durham University and the University of Piura (Perú). She is a member of the editorial board of the journal Estudios Sobre Educación (Studies About Education).

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