

Deweyan Aesthetics as Experiential Education

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With the publication of *Experience and Education*, John Dewey created a colossal project for education theorists. He conceives of a new kind of education “within, by, and for experience,” and he demands a clear practical and theoretical conception of what experience is (Dewey, 1938, pp. 9–10). Nearly a hundred years later, the project is still in progress. While theorists continue to work with Dewey’s progressive philosophy, his definition of traditional education still captures what happens in practice: “the subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation” (p. 5). In this paper, I contribute to the progressive education project first by taking a step back in Deweyan theory to his earlier work *Art as Experience*. Like his progressive theory of education, Dewey’s aesthetic theory is rooted in experience. His aesthetics, however, are more abstract, not specifically a theory of education nor even of art, but rather a theory that may and should permeate all facets of life. I suggest the clear conception of experience needed for progressive education may be aesthetic experience.

My work in this paper should be interesting to education theorists and, particularly, to educators *as* theorists. I demonstrate two things to the educator as theorist: first, that educators may and should engage with established theory actively such that the end result is a personal theory founded on established theory; and, second, that an individual educator in a single classroom may be capable of realizing progressive theory far more effectively than the institution of schooling as a whole. I assert that the possibility of the latter demands the former as an obligation. My argument provides an example of an educator’s personal theory developed from established theory in such a way as to be immediately applicable in a single classroom.

I present Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience as a progression from presence in a foreign environment to the establishment of a metabolic relationship with the environment, finally culminating in a thoughtful expression by which the individual establishes equilibrium with the environment. Through the lens of aesthetic and metabolic

experience, I read Lewis Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a narrative illustration of Dewey's theory and a demonstration of metabolic learning in progress. I then flip the lens and read Dewey's theory through *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In doing so, I expand Dewey's aesthetic progression to include experience in environments not only physical and spatial but also intellectual and psychological. The expansion I advance serves to break down false separations between mind and body showing that the brain is as much involved in experience and metabolism as the rest of the body. I conclude by demonstrating how Dewey's aesthetic theory, expanded through Carroll's novel, may adjust other theories of learning, including as examples Maxine Greene's approach to assessment in aesthetic education and Jerome Bruner's reimagining of Lev Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development.

In Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) he examines the process by which people creatively engage with their environments and the connection between art and the everyday means of living. Dewey's search for the aesthetic experience begins with a "willingness] to find the germs and roots in matters of experience that we do not currently regard as esthetic" (p. 11). Dewey explains these germs and roots originate from environmental interaction.

He refers to metabolic processes as a kind of extra sense by which organisms engage with their environments. "No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are a means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself" (p. 12). The organism does not merely touch, see, hear, taste, and smell its environment; it breathes, consumes, and excretes its environment. The drive not merely to sense but to metabolize the environment comes from a feeling of need that also functions as "a demand, a reaching out into the environment to make good the lack and to restore adjustment by building at least a temporary equilibrium" (p. 12). The most basic impulse to action and therefore to art is the restoration of harmony between organism and environment.

Ultimately, art occurs as an expression out of experience and into the environment. The aesthetic progression is "like breathing a rhythm of intakes and outgivings" by which the "resistance and tensions" felt in the environment are converted into "a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close" (p. 58). Dewey gives the example of a bird building a nest; the nest is both part of her and also her expression. The human, however, is distinct from other animals in that humans act in this way consciously with an understanding of cause and effect, that is, in time (p. 25). It is "not just quantitative, or just more energy, but is qualitative, a transformation of energy into thoughtful

action, through assimilation of meanings from the background of past experiences” (p. 63).

It is important that the aesthetic progression has a culmination in “thoughtful action.” Dewey (1934) uses the term “*an* experience” to differentiate aesthetic experience from other kinds of experience; “*an* experience” occurs “when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” and therefore is “integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (pp. 36–37). The aesthetic progression includes reflection both in the early process (the “assimilation of meanings from background of past experiences”) and in the culmination. *An* experience is neither a “loose succession” of experiences, nor is it experiences held together with only a “mechanical connection” (p. 41). The aesthetic progression involves reflection and thoughtful action from beginning to end. The one experiencing is conscious, aware, and intentional.

Aesthetic experience, therefore, is a progression from presence in an unknown environment and an accompanying sense of need or disequilibrium to engaging in a metabolic relationship with the environment. Because the process is metabolic, it necessarily involves the changing of the individual by the environment and the changing of the environment by the individual. The result of this mutual change is both artistic expression and, at the same time, the reestablishment of equilibrium between the individual and the environment.

On one level, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* provides a nearly perfect step-by-step illustration of this process. The sense of disequilibrium is dramatically illustrated by Alice’s long fall down the rabbit hole. At the bottom she feels the need to reorient herself, to get through the door, to find the key, to become the right size. Throughout the story, she must engage with the dream world metabolically, eating cakes and mushrooms and drinking from dubiously labeled bottles. This process changes Alice, again quite dramatically, as she grows and shrinks and eventually finds a way to restore herself to a reasonable size. Alice’s experience in Wonderland lines up closely with most of Dewey’s aesthetic progression, that is, until it comes time for Alice to express herself in a thoughtfully formulated kind of art. While Alice certainly changes her environment throughout her journey through Wonderland (when, for example, she grows right up out of a house and destroys it), she simply comes out of the dream at a crucial moment in the narrative. There is no conclusion, no culmination, and, arguably, no real purpose to what happens in Wonderland. On this level, it appears to be experience that fails to form art. As an illustration of experiential education, a Deweyan theorist might rightly criticize Carroll’s story as “planless improvisation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 10).

A closer analysis of the complex and thoughtful text of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* reveals another, deeper connection to Dewey's aesthetics. To move from the first level to the second, it is necessary to show two Alices in the story. The first level deals with the Alice who is *in* the dream world and her experiences within that environment. The second level deals with the Alice who is dreaming and who therefore *creates* the dream world. As Alice awakens from the dream at the end of the story, Carroll shifts the narrative point of view from the sleeping Alice to her older sister. The sister looks forward to when Alice will be a grown woman and how she will keep "the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale..." (Carroll, 1865, p. 60). The narrative shift and the objective perspective of the sister give the reader a new view of Alice. She is no longer a little girl lost in a fantastical dream world. She becomes the creator of the world; she is story-teller, the poet, the dreamer, the artist. To reflect this shift to the deeper level of analysis, I refer to this story as Alice's Wonderland, emphasizing that both the world and the story of the world are Alice's aesthetic expression.

My second, multidimensional analysis of Alice's Wonderland begins with the internal conflict. Alice is not only lost in a bizarre dream world; she also questions her own identity, particularly in relation to her school-learning. After falling down the rabbit hole, she thinks to herself:

"I'm sure I'm not Ada," she said, "for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn't go in ringlets at all; and I'm sure I can't be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh! she knows such a very little! Besides, SHE'S she, and I'm I, and—oh dear, how puzzling it all is! I'll try if I know all the things I used to know. Let me see: four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh dear! I shall never get to twenty at that rate! ... "I must be Mabel after all, and I shall have to go and live in that poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with, and oh! ever so many lessons to learn! No, I've made up my mind about it; if I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here!" (pp. 7–8)

Alice is neither sure of her multiplication tables, of nursery rhymes, nor even of whether she is herself. She concludes thus, "It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying 'Come up again, dear!' I shall only look up and say 'Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else'" (p. 8).

The passage reveals Alice's disequilibrium to be internal, cognitive, intellectual, and psychological, and the foreign environment, against

which she continually tests herself throughout the book, is the subject matter she has learned in school. In the chapter to which I refer, her brain in dreaming processes, her multiplication tables, and her knowledge of geography and poetry ultimately produces something quite original if technically incorrect. The reader follows Alice as she breaks down and reformulates meaning. This is metabolism in its most literal sense, and it occurs throughout Alice's dream.

The most persuasive examples of cognitive metabolism come from the poems Alice creates in Wonderland. At some point in her schooling she encountered Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them," a call-and-response poem between a youth and an old man in which the old man answers successive questions about his advanced age with snippets of wisdom that are simple, bordering on trite. When Alice attempts to recite this poem in Wonderland, what comes out is a sardonic parody that ends with the old man, fed up with being questioned about his age, threatening to throw the youth down the stairs. When she has finished, it occurs to Alice that "some of the words had got altered," and the Caterpillar, to whom she is reciting, responds that it was "wrong from beginning to end." (p. 20). Of course, alteration is a necessary and inevitable part of any metabolic process; "variation...is an indispensable coefficient of aesthetic order" (Dewey, 1934, p. 170). When Alice says, "words had got altered" she indicates she has digested the original poem and produced an entirely new piece of art. The Caterpillar, like so many traditional teachers, fails to recognize the value of this, marking it down as simply "wrong." To most readers, however, it is clear Alice's reformulations of the poems and nursery rhymes throughout the book show creative genius, perhaps more so than the original versions.

Throughout the story, Alice's attempts to reproduce her book-learning result in expressions that have been altered, changed, metabolized. In Alice's Wonderland, even language and sense are broken down and reformulated; what should be simple exchanges of thought come out as complex and often-humorous wordplays.

"Take some more tea," the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

"I've had nothing yet," Alice replied in an offended tone, "so I can't take more."

"You mean you can't take *less*," said the Hatter: "It's very easy to take *more* than nothing." (Carroll, 1865, p. 33)

What appears to be a sort of madness is the churning of a brilliant brain in the process of digestion. Wonderland is the means by which Alice confronts her sense of disequilibrium in the intellectual environment of her academic subject-matter. She engages with this environment

metabolically: the traditional subject-matter is *changed* to an original product of Alice's just as Alice herself is *changed* in the process of creating it. When she comes out of the dream, the reader understands not only that she has created the original art of Wonderland, but that she has restored equilibrium and become herself an artist. This second level of analysis again reveals Dewey's aesthetic progression, this time with a foreign environment that is intellectual, a metabolic engagement that occurs through the brain, and artistic expression that takes place through the creation of a new world.

A question that arises from the second level of analysis is whether the aesthetic progression can take place in the mind with no final expression in the real world. Dewey's aesthetics are always rooted in direct sensory experience in the environment. He insists the intellectual is always connected back to "the direct sense element" which "absorbs...subdues and digests all that is merely intellectual" (Dewey, 1934, p. 30). Reading Dewey's theory back through the lens of Alice's Wonderland reveals the relationship between the intellectual, foreign environment and the direct-sense element. Alice constructs Wonderland neither from pure fantasy nor even from the purely intellectual material of her schooling but from a combination of fantasy, school-learning, and her immediate surroundings: the garden, the rabbit hole, and all the little creatures in the woods. Though Wonderland is a dream, it retains roots in the "direct sense elements." This is consistent with Dewey's effort to break down the distinction between the intellectual and the aesthetic. He writes the "ultimate matter" and "general form" of both are the same, and that it is an "odd notion" that the artist does not think and that the scientific enquirer does nothing but think (p. 14). Alice is certainly not a scientist, but she is a thinker. She is an artist who "has problems and thinks as she works" (p. 14). Alice's dream is a demonstration of what the mind of a thinking artist does as it works and solves problems, or, more simply put, Alice's dream is a demonstration of aesthetic learning as it happens.

Reading Dewey back through Alice reveals that the brain is among the "subcutaneous organs" through which one interacts with the environment. Alice's brain metabolizes sensory and intellectual input in the same way the lungs metabolize air or the stomach metabolizes food. The brain receives input from the senses and discovers, interprets, and produces (or excretes) patterns and meta-patterns in the sensory data. The brain as the organ that metabolizes patterns is consistent with Dewey's understanding of true aesthetic experience requiring expression that comes out of time and established rhythm. Metabolic processes that happen throughout the body may lead to interactions with the environment, but only when there is an element of time, by which the

brain is included in the metabolic processes, does the interaction become an aesthetic experience. Viewing Dewey's theory through the lens of Alice's Wonderland reveals it is not only possible for the aesthetic progression to happen in an intellectual environment, it is essential the brain is engaged. Two things result: first, the brain becomes a metabolic organ like any other in the body; the intellectual comes down from its pedestal. Second, even as the false elevation of the intellectual disappears, the brain becomes an essential part of the aesthetic process such that art is not art without thought, without some kind of cognitive digestion. This allows for the application of the aesthetic progression to intellectual or cognitive environments, and therefore for the application of Deweyan aesthetic theory to education, especially given that all experience, including educational experience, may and ideally should be aesthetic.

An understanding of the aesthetic learner as a whole self whose mind and body are unified in the exploration, experience, and metabolism of her environment ought to create a ripple effect influencing other theories of learning and adjustments to these theories ought to result in real, effective change in classroom practice—even if only in the individual classroom. Because educators often have substantial influence within strictly limited settings, it behooves each educator to develop and adjust educational theory such that the theory may have the maximum benefit in the arena of each educator's influence. Just as the student engages metabolically with curricula, the educator ought to engage metabolically with theory such that each educator works from a theory that is thoughtful, personal, and grounded in established theory. Perhaps the most important application of my argument is as an example of one educator's theory developed in this way. I now turn to offer additional applications to demonstrate how a core personal theory of education adjusts multiple facets of the teaching and learning process.

The first application addresses assessment. Imagine Wonderland is a final project Alice completes in order to earn a passing grade. How would one go about grading Wonderland? Traditionally, the teacher picks up a red pen, double-checks the objectives, and marks up all the errors. Wonderland is replete with errors: in geography, in mathematics, in language and literature, even in music, dance, and etiquette. Poor Alice would fail every objective, and yet it is obviously and abundantly clear Wonderland is a brilliant success and its creator a genius. This inconsistency reveals a fundamental problem in traditional assessment: the expectation that the student will reproduce learned material *unchanged*. Traditional objective assessments not only require no changes, they test for nothing but the absence of change to the subject matter.

Changes to original elements are deemed *incorrect*. Maxine Greene (2001), an educational philosopher heavily influenced by Dewey, rejects the very possibility of an adequate summation of aesthetic experience: “There can be no packaging of what has been experienced, what has been learned. Indeed, the very notion of packaging—like the notion of a finished product—is antithetical to all that aesthetic education has come to mean” (pp. 35–36). Given the brain is a metabolic organ and learning a metabolic process, assessments must leave room for students to alter the subject matter or at the very least apply it in entirely original ways. To allow for and encourage aesthetic experience, assessments must include space for creativity, originality and an openness to further exploration. As is always the case with a healthy metabolism, what comes out must not be identical to what goes in.

Another example of an aesthetic reimagining of education theory is Jerome Bruner’s (1986) presentation and reworking of Lev Vygotsky’s concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD). In Vygotsky’s ZPD, the teacher is fully capable of using the skill or knowledge, and she adjusts down to where the student has a concept of the skill or knowledge but cannot put into action. The teacher works with the student to practice the skill or knowledge thereby assisting the student in achieving mastery. Learning happens in a zone where the student may recognize and comprehend material but may not quite be able to generate or apply the material (Bruner, 1986). Vygotsky’s ZPD is an effective approach to teaching, but it is more compatible with traditional education than with aesthetic education. In aesthetic education learning is not linear, not hierarchical; the teacher does not sit above the student and assist a climb. It is instead exploratory, active, creative, and metabolic. This raises the question of what the role of the aesthetic educator should be, a question similar to one Dewey (1938) raises as he constructs his progressive theory of education: how to establish contacts between the mature teacher and the immature learner “without violating the principle of learning through personal experience” (p. 7). Bruner (1986) explores the question of how exactly a teacher or tutor may assist a student through Vygotsky’s ZPD, and, in doing so, he reimagines the process in a way more compatible with aesthetic education. Bruner explains how one tutor “turned the task into play and caught it in a narrative that gave it continuity” (p. 75). Consistent with aesthetic experience, this tutor took a relatively concrete task (building a pyramid out of interlocking wooden blocks) and turned the task into a narrative, that is, a world to be explored through play. In a separate essay, Bruner remembers a chemistry teacher who told her class, “It is a very puzzling thing not that water turns to ice at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, but that it should change from a liquid into a solid” (p. 126). He explains this

teacher was “inviting [him] to extend [his] world of wonder to encompass *hers*. She was not just *informing* [him]. She was, rather, negotiating the world of wonder and possibility” (p. 126). This teacher created a zone where aesthetic learning may take place. A ZPD for aesthetic learning is not the space where the student understands but cannot quite generate; it is rather the space where the wonder of the unknown meets the desire to explore. It is the space across which the student reaches out from herself into the unknown.

Put another way, the beginning of aesthetic learning must be the student’s want of the material—where the term *want* encompasses the feelings of both lack and desire at once. There is a particular and telling moment in Alice’s Wonderland when she reaches the aesthetic ZPD. After the initial shock of falling down the rabbit hole, shrinking to a fraction of her size, and interacting with a host of woodland animals, Alice encounters a bottle for the second time. This time, however, there is no label that reads “DRINK ME.” The imperative, the command is no longer necessary. Alice willingly drinks from the bottle, but not—as would be the situation in Vygotsky’s ZPD—because she has seen an instructor do the same and knows what to expect. Rather, her rationale for drinking from the bottle is as follows: “I know SOMETHING interesting is sure to happen...whenever I eat or drink anything; so I’ll just see what this bottle does” (Carroll, 1865, p. 15). Though Alice hopes to grow larger by trying the bottle’s contents, ultimately she drinks without any clear expectation of what will happen. It is her desire for something interesting that impels her. This is the aesthetic ZPD, the place where wonder touches desire. The role of the aesthetic educator is not to impart knowledge or help in the practice of skills; it is to share wonder, to communicate one’s own sense of lack and desire in order to expand those senses in one’s students. Thus Alice’s sister’s prediction at the end of the story is not only that Alice will be an artist, a story-teller, but also that she will be an effective aesthetic educator, one who shares wonder, one who makes children’s eyes “bright and eager.” In aesthetic learning, the role of the teacher is to give students a sense of the grandness of the world they may choose to explore.

In the phrase “choose to explore” there arises a problem the solution to which is essential to both the theory and practice of aesthetic education. As most educators are well aware, many students do not respond to a sense of lack with curiosity and desire. Many—far too many—sense lack and respond by shutting down. Even the brilliantly creative Alice has her moment, crying herself a pool of tears at the bottom of the rabbit hole. This shutting down is a sign of illness, an illness that seems to match Bruner’s (1979) explanation of why the power of metaphor in art is ineffectual to some:

There is “overanticipation” of what is likely to be internally dangerous; ...the neurotic avoids everything that *might* be dangerous and in the end is immobilized. It is this overefficient pre-emptiveness that makes such metaphoric activity sick, in contrast to the illuminating quality of great myth and great poetry. (pp. 14–15)

Bruner’s explanation of the failure of metaphor suggests students shut down because they see the unknown, foreign worlds of potential aesthetic experience not as filled with wonder but as fraught with peril. The traditional solution is to remove the sense of lack, to reduce the scope and foreignness of the subject matter until the student may grasp it without ever really needing to explore it. Such an approach obviates the need and possibility for the student to have an aesthetic experience and grow healthier by it. In such cases, the educator has the difficult job of walking a fine line between two traumas: on the one hand a sense of lack that is too severely overwhelming and on the other hand the complete removal of the desire to learn. For students insufficiently equipped to manage a sense of lack, educators must carefully adjust until they find just the right amount of disequilibrium to position the students in *want* of learning. The goal is “the ‘touch of disorder’ that lends charm” (Dewey, 1934, p. 173).

The tendency of students to shut down when confronted with a sense of lack or disequilibrium in a foreign environment leads to a final important application of education as aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is directly connected to health such that it both promotes and indicates health. Dewey imagines an “infinitely greater happiness” (p. 84) would attend a society better ordered around aesthetic experience. The psychoanalyst and child psychologist D. W. Winnicott (1986) writes, “creativity belongs to being alive” (p. 41) and creative living “strengthens the feeling that we are alive, that we are ourselves” (p. 43). Educating by aesthetic experience treats the learner as a whole self, and the process ought to promote life, health, and a strengthened identity in students. It is a curative process by which educators may promote the health of students whose sense of creativity is paralyzed or bruised. Furthermore, the aesthetic process may also be diagnostic. For decades, society has demanded to know why the education system has been failing to educate every student. A theory of aesthetic education provides educators a tool with which to cross-examine society. Why are so many students lacking the minimum level of health needed to engage in the natural act of exploration, an act so basic it is inherent to every living organism? Why are so many students “cowed by fear or dulled by routine” (Dewey, 1934, p. 175)? It is the legal obligation of education professionals to report signs of abuse or neglect. If this obligation extends also to the

abuse and neglect of the aesthetic sensibilities, including the senses of wonder, curiosity, and the desire to learn, then there is a great deal of reporting to be done. Understanding education through Dewey's aesthetic theory leads not only to a more-fully-engaged approach to teaching and learning but also to education as an environment that diagnoses illness and ultimately promotes the health of all learners.

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