The interactive installation “Sensible Threshold”
A study of collaborative art work and transformative learning processes

ANJA KRAUS
Educational Sciences, Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg, Ludwigsburg, Germany

ANNA-LENA ØSTERN
Aesthetical Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norge
ABSTRACT

This contribution first argues for the importance of an aesthetic perspective on learning processes in school. We point out that aesthetical learning processes could be a method of teaching different subjects. Hereby we range argumentatively firstly on a field called radical aesthetics. We deviate from this concept in our assumption that most artistic standpoints should be modified so as to be suitable for pedagogical and didactical areas of operation. Hence we also have to face the special challenges arising through the need of a translation of the programme of radical aesthetics into the praxis of teaching in all subjects. As one possible answer to these difficult challenges we have developed the project of the „Sensible Threshold”. This will be presented in the second part of our contribution.
RADICAL AESTHETICS AND SCHOOL

Radical aesthetics\(^1\) ranges as an alternative to the modest aesthetics in schools of today. Modest aesthetics is discipline based and the art subject in question has a few lessons in a space of its own. It is marginalised, because it fights for a place of its own and it is restricted concerning being active regarding new art forms and aesthetics. Radical aesthetics is radical in the sense that it uses the possibilities of aesthetics to create meaning, qualify the learning and develop school in a fundamental way. It suggests art as a part cross curriculum in all subjects and projects. The following assumption of Lena AULIN-GRÅHAMN, Magnus PERSSON & Jan THAVENIUS (2004) is in a way primal for the other arguments:

1. **Art facilitates experiences of meaning.**

AULIN-GRÅHAMN, PERSSON & THAVENIUS (2004) argue that school today has a shortage of meaning for the pupils. In their opinion the project of creating meaning can be focused by introducing *art as method*. Art welcomes questions, it embraces things not yet ready, it promotes a seeking and open attitude and it appreciates divergent thinking and personal solutions. Different aspects of knowledge and of aesthetics can be held together by art. Feelings and experiences can be united with intellectual issues; expression with reception, analysis and reflection, form with content. The Swedish authors write: “[…] personal/individual processes are held together with social [respectively]/collective ones, popular-cultural forms are held together with established art forms, natural science perspectives are held together with linguistic, aesthetic and cultural historical perspectives and so on. […] The students must be able to use their own and other peoples’ experiences,

\(^1\) Cp. AULIN-GRÅHAMN, PERSSON & THAVENIUS 2004
reflect upon them, and critically and creatively relate themselves to the theories which exist concerning knowledge, culture and aesthetics.”² Thus the kind of negotiations necessary in collective productions could not least introduce school as an arena for democratic dialogues about what kind of society young people wants for themselves tomorrow.

2. **Art is connected with skills and learning.**

Friedrich BOLLNOW (1988) writes: „We live in a world art has taught us to perceive.”³ The world we live in is not simply what it is. We have learnt to see it the way we see it. Thus it is different from other possible worlds or views. Connected hereto is the fact that the formation of the senses takes place not only in a natural way. It is also constituted by cultural processes. Perceptivity arises from encountering multifaceted phenomena and it develops itself only if staying in touch with cultural objectivities. Seen like this neither work nor everyday life nor sciences are the best counsellors but art. Susan WRIGHT (2003) writes about the cultural construction of reality in the following way: “Artistic expression, in a modest or grand way, communicates and shapes our thoughts, perceptions and feelings. It helps us to represent our experiences of life, and to develop, strengthen and transform our beliefs and values.”⁴ Hence, arts not only reveal our cultural heritage, they are also a means by which the cultures we live in are defined and also evaluated.

3. **Aesthetic means are capable to attract young people´s interest.**

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³ BOLLNOW 1988, p.33. Translated by Anja Kraus
⁴ WRIGHT 2003, p.303
Today young people learn about aesthetics in their free time culture. This culture is to a large extent hybrid and performative, a cross over back and forth from drama to visual art, dance and music. The type of fascination supplied by dramatised performances has a strong appeal to the emotional life. In case this blurring of art forms happens in a sophisticated and developed way, even market aesthetics has a value foundation in accordance with the value foundation of school. The virtual world then is a qualified supplier of fascination as well as knowledge and competences. Other examples prove the opposite. At schools not only in social hot spots the learning goal to overcome boredom sometimes stands in the centre of the classes at school. Here the commitment of the teachers often has to counteract merchantable trends besides social prejudices and attitudes deriving e.g. from a pupil’s family background. By means of art various possibilities of studying such phenomena as well as possibilities to give these a different value are predisposed.

4. **Art enables the development of multidisciplinary and qualified competences.**

In summer 1997 in New York an intense debate about school development and about the possibilities of a school reform focussing on art took place. Hereby to a lesser extent philanthropical motives were deciding than such oriented to the needs of society: By strengthening arts an improvement of the achievement in schools is expected, especially concerning the development of key competences. Such motives of qualification are affiliated with those of social integration.

The focussing on competences marks a worldwide paradigm shift, where matters of educational policy, educational theory as well as anthropological arguments meet. According to the PISA-survey competences are “[…] the sum of available or learnable abilities and skills as well as the willingness of a student to solve arising problems and to act responsibly
and critically concerning the solution.”56 Evident here is a particular structural characteristic of the competences important for our effort to integrate standpoints of art in settings of learning in school: „A competence is the result of competence – one is enabled to do something by feeling responsible for it.“7 In other words: In order to become competent one must already be competent. A competence reveals not only a „how to do…“ It is rather characterized by self-reference on a pre-verbal and preconscious level. To act competently means to refer to mathematics while calculating or counting, to refer to communication and its rules, dynamics and imponderabilities etc. while communicating. A self-referent structure eludes efforts of influence. This is true not least for didactical and pedagogical efforts. At the same time competences as „second order techniques“ (according to system theoretical approaches) cannot stand on their own. They need and generate mediums of their operations. The most fundamental medium is the human body.

5. Art provides informal learning processes.

The worldwide paradigm shift in the area of schooling comes along with a drift back to basics, respectively to measurable achievements. We doubt that this could support the kind of school to provide the adults of tomorrow with the learning needed in order to be active in their own lives and in society. The task for school is among others to work with images of a future world worth living in. Children and young people learn about 80 to 85 % of what they learn outside school. In particular a sustainable cultural, ecological, social and economical development is part of these images of the future that are conveyed informally. Also a

5 HENNING & KEUNE 2004, p.149
6 WEINERT 2001, p.7
7 LIEBAU 2003, p.424. Translated by Anja Kraus.
notion of citizenship is part of a culturally sustainable development considering as well the preservation as the shaping of new cultural expressions. In this regard especially informal learning arenas are actually discussed as important parts of young people’s learning. We will deepen this thought in the following chapter:

6. **Artistic learning processes generate knowledge of the body.**

First, the assumption that one could relate oneself with one’s body in the same way as this is possible with the body of another person is an illusion of the conscious Ego that rules the Western history of civilisation. This illusion leads to a reification and at the same time dematerialisation of the individual human body and its activities that is not least influencing the actual worldwide debates about schooling. Corporality, however, is the sensuous bridge between corporal-emotional experience and interrelations that emerge in a perceptible way from corporal processes. Such a sensuous perception itself is an inner and invisible noticing of certain life-world data, of one’s own thoughts, feelings and movements. A contribution of sensuous perceptions and observations to the learning processes at school can even be stated on the level of critical cogitation. Following Fritz BÖHLE, Sabine PFEIFFER & Nese SEVSAY-TEGETHOFF (2004) the diverse competences seen in relation to the needs of the actual world of work converge in the key competence to handle imponderabilities. The authors point out that an actional handling of experiences generally depends on an explorative approach, on pictorial-associative thinking and on a perception led by an acute sense. These are all not primarily rationally, but implicitly and corporally mediated accesses to actual situations.
According to Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY (1994) the body is an *organ of thinking*. Corporality, Bernhard WALDENFELS (1994) points out, can even displace all symbolical mediums and advance to the „sole medium“.

Artistic learning processes generate knowledge which is deeply rooted in the sensuousness, where feelings and thinking are integrated in a holistic understanding. The so-called aesthetic response implies for the student an active and conscious experimentation with form in order to generate meaning. The aesthetic response derives from an “aesthetic doubling”: Perceiving (art) is accompanied by a process of imagining that reveals the meaning of that what is seen. This process stands in the centre of all processes of learning. Because: Learning demands us to perceive the similarities of connate phenomena, to pass diverse life-worlds, to empathize in the dynamics of different worlds of imagination, to realise the specifics of a certain operation. Learners call up their own systems of order to figure out to which life-worlds a certain operation belongs to. They recognize the fact that one order is excluding the other. They do this by referring to their pool of experience that is accumulated in their bodies.

Thus, there will be given space for what John DEWEY (1935) called transformative artistic learning processes. In his transformative aesthetic theory an artistic learning process is described by a passing through a transformative process that creates new relationships of meaning. By transforming one medium into another a person gets a new perspective on reality, himself, other people, nature, on life in general. E.g. an idea serves as a basis for a narration transformed into a certain body language embracing as well the modulation of the

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9 WALDENFELS 1994, p.467
10 Vgl. ISER 1976
voice as the movements of the body etc. Kay O’HALLORAN (2005) states that „[…] the potentials of the language, of the symbolic and of the visual presentation can be used and combined in a way the semiotic expansion is wider than the sum of the significations deriving from each of these resources standing alone.“

TEACHING FROM AN AESTHETIC LEVEL

To teach from an aesthetic level means principally that the art form you are working in gives you the rules and the frames for the work. Hence, a sharp profile of a major task can be characterized by the following aspects:

1. To initiate a dialogue between art processes and other learning processes requires that the notion of sensuous experience evokes an engagement to give an active aesthetic response. The qualities in the transformations which are the consequences of the active aesthetic response should be made discernable by the teacher. As these learning processes are corporally mediated and thus on a large scale invisible, this is a rather difficult task.

2. Principally an aesthetic or artistic learning process is characterized by a learning where the individual’s relationship to something is changed, a new perspective on reality is opened. The pupil has to be prepared and willing to engage in such processes of change and the teacher has the major task to initiate such processes.

3. The part of the teacher to integrate art as a method in his teaching connected to sense making processes is that he is capable of handling the dramaturgy of the classroom and can cause aesthetic learning processes. The spatial conditions and those deriving

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31 O’HALLORAN 2005, p.16
from time schedules in a school often do not agree with this type of teaching. Also the high amount of pupils and the manifold activities to be coordinated may serve as an argument against it.

4. The question is not least which kind of artistic positions or ways of acting can be used for the development of multidisciplinary and qualified competences.

Drama in school is facing these challenges successfully since many decades. A reason for this, so we can conclude from our argumentation, is the fact that in drama the use of symbolic representation is at the core of the learning potential of the special form of art. A significant dramatic action can be constructed through the use of powerful signs. Pamela BOWELL and Brian HEAP (2001) point out that: “Once the drama teacher begins to understand that she has symbolic, iconic and expressive systems of representation at her disposal she can begin to fulfil the requirements of the drama more efficiently by plugging in to the most appropriate signing system.”

In the following we will show that due to this fact there will be space for aesthetic responses as well as for transformative artistic learning processes.

Eckhart LIEBAU (2003) writes: „Good drama in school makes learning processes visible without pointing them out as an achievement of the individual alone. It is shown that together with the events on the stage latent structures of sense making processes of an individual on one hand and objective meanings without subjective intentions on the other hand are displayed.“ Following LIEBAU the task of a drama teacher is to find the best possible form of staging, facing the given possibilities for development. For the collective

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12 BOWELL & HEAP 2001, p.72
13 LIEBAU 2003, p.430. Translated by Anja Kraus.
play the pupils should come as closely as possible to the right gesture, the right attitude, the right expression. What is right or wrong is not fixed. The actors become mediums of the play. The play serves as a rule for their activities. Ethical, moral and scenic tasks as well as such of learning all form the dramaturgy, most of them are displayed retrospectively. The production is mainly conditioned by the scope and the meaning of implicit education and indirect teaching.

The work with each student is necessarily multimodal. In various situations many different, not always expectable problems arise, which are to be solved by the pupils by their own initiative and on the basis of their cognitive, emotional, technical and corporal competences. The special learning potential of drama lies in the aesthetic doubling of role, place, time and plot: While playing a scene on the stage the actors and the other staff are imagining the acting characters, the setting, the special temporality etc. out of different perspectives and so assimilate the storyline. Through conscious work in the art form of drama the teacher is able to challenge the student to give an active aesthetic response and the student might conquer ownership to his productive response and experience the satisfaction of functioning creatively as an individual and as a member of a group. The active work with construction of fiction within a drama genre gives it an aesthetic and thus fictive frame. The teacher might also explain the serious playfulness as a necessary prerequisite for the aesthetic doubling: you have to devote yourself to the construction of the fiction, you make it conditionally - not for real, for play, you bracket the demands of reality for a certain amount of time and then you leave it. You are not obliged to anything but to obey the rules of the play. So the student is enabled to go very closely and deeply into the exploration of the theme. Through the dialogue about different types of solutions to the tasks the students express their understanding and, simultaneously, the negotiation and experience of different
personal solutions to the task develop their understanding. Introducing meta-language while consciously experimenting with forms gives the students a possibility to shift between analytic reflection and emotional experience.

There are manifold theatrical forms of action that can be introduced in the frame of normal teaching, such as the „living sculpture”-convention, forms of „playback-theatre“ („pairs“ in which two persons represent one only person etc.). However, theatrical forms of action are seemingly able to stage narrative or ethical facets rather than other subjects. The question is if it would also be possible to stage specific subjects in biology, chemistry etc.

**TEACHING WITH A WORK OF ART**

The sound installation „Sensible Threshold“, developed by Anja Kraus, serves as a means of instruction and as a means of research at the same time. It serves as a means to bring about learning processes in the way described above and it provides an opportunity for the pupils to stage nearly all subjects in school.

The conception is especially led by the following consideration: Social community is perceivable not only through visual and moving images of itself or such of the extraneous other, but it is also a community of responsivity. Before a child learns to speak it is sonically addressed by others and it responds to this, at the beginning without words. In this process the integration into a community of other persons takes place: The child becomes a social being. This is the core of our motivation and for our engagement for ourselves and for our life-world. – In our daily world we find two correspondences to this thought:

1. An audio-guide used in a museum to make topics such as history, politics, culture etc. audible by means of spoken texts and sounds.
2. We can move in virtual realities, causing effects by walking or putting our hands up, etc.

Both aspects, audio-guides and virtuality, merge into the concept of the sound installation “Sensible Threshold”:

The “Sensible Threshold” is now installed in the foyer of a secondary school in Berlin: A camera assesses six areas near the entrance of a school. When a person steps into one of these areas a sound file is activated, by stepping into another area another sound file is activated. By the combination of different sounds activated by different persons a kind of audio-guide is generated.

At first learners produce their own audio-guides by choosing a subject, finding a way to make it audible and collecting the sounds by using the Internet or an MP3-Player. The pupils are instructed how to record and how to collect sounds and how to charge them digitally, how to combine them etc. By audible recordings such as ambient noise carpets, music, verbal explanations etc. a broad knowledge about a culturally significant situation or concern can be mediated. The transformation of learning contents into sounds brings about diverse learning processes. Moving their bodies and touching sounds in the foyer other kids can pick up the presented topic in emotional, imaginative, or cognitive ways. Their imaginations serve as a basis for further learning processes. The topics developed by the pupils by means of the interactive possibilities of the “Sensible Threshold” are: “Sounds of Everyday Life”, “Dying and Death”, “Atmospheres of a Metropolis”, “Love”, “the Temperate Zones of Africa”, “the Sounds of Footsteps”, “Amber”, “the Middle Ages”.

In order to evaluate the impact of the “Sensible Threshold” scientifically the lessons and afterwards the events and movements taking place afterwards in the foyer are filmed.
CONCLUSION

By producing their own audio-guides the learners seek meanings deriving from their own life-world. These meanings undergo a transformation by being catalyzed by means of the “Sensible Threshold”. In this way art facilitates experiences of meaning. The topic might be culturally important and if this is the case skills can be mediated. In any case competencies can be attained by fulfilling the task to stage a topic in a coherent and comprehensible way. Maybe the learners attain competencies such as structuring a theme, working with IT, articulating their own views, arriving at solutions by agreement etc. The learning processes can be made visible by metacognitive comments. Our experiences with motivating young people and attracting their interest by working with the “Sensible Threshold” are good. They become easily acquainted with new topics. By analysing them they enter into different disciplines (like Literature, History, Domestic Science, Cultural Science in the case of the topic “Middle Ages”) and learn special approaches how to compile the sound carpets for the installation. They can bring in their special skills and informal knowledge and by evaluating the sounds and the sound-combinations they operate with the knowledge of their body.

REFERENCES


