Corporeal Linkages between Ethics and Aesthetics as a Task of General Education (Didactics)

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this contribution is on aesthetic perceptions as practical conditions for learning. More precisely, the implications of the hypothesis of Böhle et al. (2004) on the development of competences will be examined by revealing its parallels to the educational impacts of perception-oriented artworks. This will be done within the field of Human Science Pedagogy, here from the body-phenomenological perspective, and in regards to ethical implications. With the help of an analysis of an exemplary artwork the phenomenological approach to learning will be deepened. At the same time, artworks are introduced as general means of learning. Ethical dimensions will be pointed out. The investigation of the corporeal linkages between ethics and aesthetics as task of education shall pave the way for further research on learning theories and didactics.

Key words: competences, aesthetic perception, ethical perception, human science pedagogy, body-phenomenology

1 Introduction

The replacement of knowledge transfer by the development of competences as the ultimate aim of education and learning represents a fundamental change in education, in Europe and world-wide. This counts especially for schools. Consequently, acquiring content knowledge for its own sake has been superseded by a focus on the acquisition of skills that can be used in social situations in which unpredictability plays a major role. Competences are thought to facilitate active, open-minded, exploratory, dialogical, and empathetic approaches to situational challenges in society, school, and private life (Böhle et al., 2004). Of utmost importance in this regard is the ability and willingness to learn from one’s own experiences (Weinert, 2001). Competence presupposes the awareness of the own self and self-confidence, as well as it requires the ability and sensitivity to be guided by events and occurrences that arise in one’s personal experience. By competence development, such awareness should be improved. Fritz Böhle et al. (2004) find parallels between the acquisition of competences and the educational impacts of perception-oriented artworks. Correspondingly, there is a movement in school pedagogy to use artistic approaches in all kind of school subjects.

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In this contribution, the logics of the proposal of Böhle et al. (2004) will be disclosed, first more general, then step by step. First, the paradigm-shift concerning learning and learning goals now read as competences obviously entails not only a revision of the concept of learning and its enabling factors, but also a revision of the means of learning and instruction. The illustration of more abstract subjects which must be learned no longer stands in the foreground of teaching; instead, concrete challenges in real-life contexts, as well as virtual settings of learning have increased in relevance for learning at school and for school success.

Learning settings that are based on artworks or artistic principles emphasize the ambiguous, open-ended, and contingent aspects of individual experience as a basis for learning that leads to the development of competences. This idea will be followed up by referring to two main points of discussion:
- First, the thesis will be unfolded that artistic processes encourage the development of competences by corporeal means.
- Second, the association of art with pedagogy raises questions of ethics.

This contribution thus deals with the question of how to establish a pedagogical view on art that takes into account some of the possible synergetic effects, as well as ethical aspects, of working with the arts in the field of pedagogy. The questions of aesthetics and ethics are thus narrowed to their application in pedagogy. The main point of departure is the phenomenological approach to perception and learning, and here the concept of corporeality, according to which the bodily dimensions of human existence are viewed as the origin and preliminary field of all processes of human attention and acting.

2 Corporeal Dimensions of Learning and Aesthetic Perception

Human Science Pedagogy departs from the basic thesis that upbringing and education always contains images of people - anthropological images, in which the formation of the human body, its senses, and cultural practices are of central importance (Wulf, 2013). Knowledge about the human body is here supposed to be underpinned by knowledge of the body (Kamper & Wulf, 1982). Body knowledge is regarded as a transdisciplinary research field (Renger & Wulf, 2015). Let me follow up this idea along the above mentioned agenda.

Our corporeality is our primary reference to ourselves and to the world. We not only perceive the objects given to us in our perceptions, but we also relate ourselves to our environment by means of our body. Within Pediatrics, it has been empirically demonstrated that from their very first year, children use their corporeal faculties of expression in a communicative way to reach their aims (Dornes, 1993). Through late childhood - as well as in the years thereafter, to a greater and lesser degree - human beings apprehend objects primarily in a corporeal way. Thereby, individuals interpret one and the same sensation in different ways depending on their corporeal state. Each interpretation is also part of the enculturation of the individual, respectively a mode of his or her learning. The manifold activities of body and corporeality as primary medium of learning can be considered only by agreeing on the fact that it is not only a device, but also agile and living. In the field of upbringing, it must thus especially be taken into account that the challenges for children in general differ from those for adults, as children look for orientation in a different way from adults.
Unlike the currently widespread differentiation between ‘having’ and ‘being’ a body, introduced by Helmuth Plessner (1982), the conception of corporeality introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) considers corpus as a substance and device (in German: Körper) and in continuous interrelation with sensitive and vivid organism (in German: Leib, “body”). The mediation of the individual with his/her life-world are, according to the phenomenological approach, oriented towards his/her lived experience of his/her own body as an “antetype, arche-script, primordial sound, original keypad” (Waldenfels, 2004). By engaging in our world, we always already understand thoughts, sense, and sensations in bodily terms. “Our body is our general means of having a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 146). Merleau-Ponty (1966: 282) regards the pre-reflexive dimensions as the very “matter of potential insight” that can be made thematic. As we cannot position ourselves outside of our own perceptions, we can neither reflect on our living body as such, nor can we fully grasp or express it. It is our point zero. “In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object, ever being completely constituted [marked out by M.M.-P.] is that it is the instance by which there are objects” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 92). The world arises for us, and we recognize ourselves as corporeal entities never fully able to grasp our existence. On the one side, we cannot control what we instantly perceive. On the other side, perception and spontaneous experience takes place in the body.

Merleau-Ponty (1962: 94) writes: “[…] my visual body includes a large gap at the level of my head.” The phenomenological approach reveals that the body is something for us; by bodily means we become aware of our corpus as thing. As we cannot grasp things directly and immediately as they are, there is a break or fissure, point zero, passivity, alienation, incalculability, spontaneity inside our perception. Here, our corpus, other objects, other bodies take shape. The rupture of the unity of subject and object is at the same time a unity. The perception (at the fissure) can be named as modes of self and world-constituting corporeality. We grasp all differences as well as the unities (or entities) in our life-world primarily in a pre-reflexive mode. Diverse tacit dimensions of knowing, passivity, alienation, and other incalculable conditions as well as calculated techniques come into play at the fissure or break. Here, the body and its perceptions become something for us, and not least rational ideas are formed. This means, rationality is not the only instance making sense. Cognitive elements are moreover aspects of a perception of sense. There is a heuristics of the corporeality. In order to grasp difference (fissure, break) of perception as a heuristic sense, Bernhard Waldenfels (1998: 44) points out the difference between what shows itself and the modus of how it shows itself: we become aware of a thing as something, of others as others. Waldenfels (ibid.) describes it in methodological regards as the adequate phenomenological perspective. Applied e.g. to the field of Children Studies, it will then be explored how something shows itself for a child (Kraus, 2011). Seen from this perspective, it appears to be an advantage for pedagogy to be foremost a practice.

To explore how something shows itself can be done by looking at how an item comes into view in an artwork, and how the perceiver deals with it. The ground for all our perceptions are our senses, our orientation in time and space, the subjectivity of our experiences, our mental state, environmental and social factors, etc.

The self and world-constituting corporeality is thus seen as the primary mode of learning how something is. In learning something happens to us: we experience our receptivity (how something shows itself). Furthermore, learning is modelled as process of “learning differently” (Buck, 1989), namely, as a change in the sense of a transformation, a “painful turn-around” in
which a person breaks with former frames of orientation and opens to a new being-in-the-world (Meyer-Drawe, 2005: 31). In a primarily bodily “alteration of one’s disposition” a change of one’s whole horizon of experience (Buck, 1989: 44) happens. Learning is not regarded as something well-defined; “[…] just what one wants to see stays invisible, i.e. the moment when learning begins, its course, its dramaturgy” (Meyer-Drawe, 2004: 77).

It should thus be mentioned that the phenomenological theoretical framework, however well-known in European academia, seems to be rather contradictory to our common-sense notion of learning. The body does not usually appear to us as a means of learning, unless we explicitly refer to the field of sports or health. If contemplated at all in the process of learning, our body usually appears as a hindrance: as uneasy, tired, painful, lazy, etc. Furthermore, in this notion of learning we tend to associate a ‘mesh of borders’ at first with deviant behavior, with a state of ignorance or chaos. The phenomenological approach moreover faces the process of gaining insights not merely as connected to abstraction or distanced reflection. The concept of corporeality moreover undercuts the dichotomy between the transparency of consciousness and the opacity of objective reality: the measures, meanings, coherences, qualities, and values of given facts derive from our individual coordination of internal and external realities.

According to the phenomenological approach, the grasping of sense cannot be abstracted from the experiences of the real world. The experience of sense is modelled as a complex mesh of borders and contrasts, characterized by ambiguities and simulations that derive, as Waldenfels (2002: 165) points out, from the abundance of colour, sound, light, space, language, objects, etc. in the physical world. Gernot Boehme (1986: 293) describes this point as follows: “Our eyes are not opposite to the things, they are not only scanning them with the gaze, but our eyes are in the things as much as the things are in them. Images not only sketch a world of objects in the distance, but also a world in which the emergence of reality becomes visible; defining itself as a kind of subject. […] We live in the world and not in front of the world.” We cannot position ourselves outside our bodies, and “[…] the distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 167). In the process of experiencing we are not in front of objects, as our view of objects suggests, but within them (feeling the warmth of the sun, observing a spider walking, etc.). Although cultural, social, societal, and individual categories are in a way (pre)reflected in it, corporeality remains beyond theory, one can grasp it only in parts. The coming-into-being of something is especially accentuated in aesthetic perception. To quote Merleau-Ponty’s (1962): “[…] Philosophy is […] like art, the act of bringing truth into being” in terms of the chiasm of features of reality with subjective, sensory, imaginative, and especially iconic orders. Martin Seel (1991: 52) writes: “In aesthetic perception we are aware of ourselves as percipients — not merely as self-conscious beings but as beings who allow their corporeal sensorium be explicitly active.” Thus, aesthetic perception is a way of getting to know also one’s own ongoing learning processes and competence development (Böhle et al., 2004) in a corporeal way. Aesthetic perception is then defined as a heuristic sense with diverse approaches for dealing with our life-world. Developing this sense can be seen as a life-long task.

Insofar aesthetic perception reveals the heuristic sense of a person in action, it is possible to investigate what somebody learns from an artwork by observing practices, maybe also making a person comment his/her process of exploring. In the following, the corporeal dimensions of didactics will be unfolded in the context of educational impacts of a perception-oriented artwork. Also, some ethical impacts will be explained.
3 Learning as Individual Sense-Making Process and Art

Scientists and practitioners agree that learning foremost requires learners to recognize their abilities to engage with the subjects they are learning – this is called their “self-efficacy”. (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 2003: 543). Gaining self-efficacy can be interpreted in the sense of “active learning,” which Kaiser (1987: 13) attaches to the effort of the teaching person “[…] to look for methods to facilitate a theoretical learning on the basis of one’s own modes of action.” Similarly, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his function as a teacher in a primary school, made the point of encouraging the pupils to gather theoretical knowledge independently, that is, by following (more or less) their own initiative in transforming their theoretical knowledge by applying it to certain fields of experience. This, according to Wittgenstein (1973), leads to a process of “demonstrative teaching,” a mode of learning which is initiated mainly by pre-reflexive impulses coming from the teacher, the things, the others, or from the learner him- or herself.

To deepen the phenomenological approach to learning and at the same time introduce artworks as a means of learning, I will give an example of an artwork, the performance MOMA GOES ON! (2004) by Ellen Kobe. My hypothesis is that, through this work, the process of conveying knowledge becomes visible. That is to say, by taking part in the work, the spectator experiences the process of learning as it is modelled in phenomenology: sense-making by pre-reflexive processes become visible, though these processes may only partly merge into reflexivity and bring about learning.

[Figure 1] Ellen Kobe: MOMA GOES ON!, Performance in Berlin’s New National Gallery, 2004, © Berliner Zeitung / Gerd Engelsmann

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2 The psychological concept of self-efficacy was originally developed by Albert Bandura (1997). Today, among others, the SELF Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Australia works extensively on this topic.

3.1 Description\(^4\)

“Ellen Kobe

**MOMA GOES ON!**

The display of works from New York's MoMA-collection in Berlin's New National Gallery received an enormous amount of public attention in Germany. The MoMA and certain particularly well-known oil paintings became part of the collective (un-)consciousness of people in Germany.

After having worked as a tour guide in the MoMA-exhibition for six months and finding myself in-between the stream of visitors and the works of art almost daily, I have developed the idea for an art project called MOMA GOES ON!

It consists of a video-work and a series of colour-photographs.

When the exhibition closes on the 19th of September, there will be a gap between the lively memories of over a million visitors and the expectations of many who did not have the chance to see it.

In the video MOMA GOES ON! I will continue my tour in front of the empty white walls of the New National Gallery. After over 300 tours through the exhibition, talking about the art has become independent from the paintings. I am finding words about works which are no longer present.

My aim is to question how spoken language might evoke the missing pictures from collective memory into concrete observation and imagination.

In MOMA GOES ON!, photographs will represent the originals and serve as hints, possibly about the works I am commenting on in the video.

Before the exhibition ends I wish to photograph some of the MoMA-paintings – those I regularly comment on in my tours – in such a way that a fragment of my body appears in front of each picture, so that it seems as if the person speaking becomes part of the picture. The works of modern art thus become animated through the photographic manipulation.

Conception: Ellen Kobe
Kamera: Axel Gerke
Sound: Andreas Prescher
Cutting: Maude Fornaro Jouck
Music: Modest Mussorgsky – *Pictures Bilder einer Ausstellung*”

Formally seen, the performance MOMA GOES ON! is a guided tour in an exhibition hall without any exhibits. At second glance, MOMA GOES ON! appears not only as a spoken, performative, and pantomimic, but also as a deictic mode of presenting something (here, theories about art and art history). By this performance, the hidden aspects of guiding in a museum comes into expression: the societal significance of the popular but at the time of the performance already completed exhibition of MoMA in Berlin; the remembrance of great works of art presented at MoMA; the empty rooms; the personal history and the mental states of the visitors and the museum guide (the artist) connected to this exhibition; the gestures,

\(^4\) Hollersen, 2004
movements, and habits regarded as typically connected to a tour of the museum; in parts, also the conditions of getting permission for this performance. Thus, many possibilities for sense-making can be associated with the performance. They come into view just as the material focus of the actions, the exhibits that are actually missing. Making sense of the performance is left up to the spectators, who interpret their own associations primarily by getting a feeling of the situation. In the first moments, they just not understand what happens. The spectators must maintain their active, open-minded, exploratory, dialogical, and empathetic approaches to a situational challenge. They may then feel that, in MOMA GOES ON!, the missing (object) is constituted in the perceptive field of the spectator in a decelerated way, thus allowing the gradual constitution of sense (and nonsense). The spectator is made aware of a process of sense-making unfolding between her-/himself and the acting artist, between the manifold conditions of her actions, the missing objects, and the other spectators and him-/herself. To succeed in slowly making sense of the situation, the spectator has to follow up the happening by in a heuristic way understanding the movements of the acting person by invoking inner images according to these movements as well as to the spoken words of the artist, connecting it to the wider context of what is occurring. Then, the unusual situation is grasped by corporeality. As this starts from confusion, there is a moment in which unreasonable demand is placed on the spectator, from which s/he might even slightly suffer. However, s/he may learn from the performance a wider understanding of art as a complex context of individual, social, societal, and material conditions. S/he is exposed to its performative and imaginative aspects, as well as to his/her own possibilities to make sense of the situation, etc. The art performance shows sense-making or learning in a situation of lack, based in the corporeality of the learner and it emphasizes the change of one’s horizon of orientation in learning processes.

To grasp this in terms of didactics: The performance MOMA GOES ON! can, on the one hand, be read as a kind of phenomenology of making sense. On the other hand, sense-making and learning from the situation turns out to be a competence itself.5 Thus, the development of competences is here closely connected to a sense-making in which the interdependency of materiality and sensation plays a central role.

The experience of lack is also a principle in ethical terms, that is to say, a central aspect of ethical perceptions. Let us go deeper into the significance of the phenomenological concept of break and fissure and refer it to ethics. In this context, also the question will be put, what this notion means for the relationship of ethics and aesthetics in the field of pedagogy.

4 Bodily Linkages between Ethics and Aesthetics in the Field of Art

Human practices, bodies, and things contain and deal with power structures, hindrances, and counter-reactions (Waldenfels, 2006: 239); that is: with ethical aspects.

However, when it comes to the relationship between human imagination and ethical parameters it has in the field of art not been clear since Romanticism (Klotter & Beckenbach, 2012: 72): it is moreover left up to the contemplators of art who must clarify the ethics or ethical impacts of an artwork by themselves, i.e. subjectively. There is thus a lack of common

5 This also implies that artworks can serve as empirical data in the social sciences, but I will not pursue this line of thought here.
sense in the said context. This lack was even taken up by avant-garde in order to explore the connection of art-specific icons with customarily ethical notions. Thus the potential cohesion of icon and ethics is, usually on purpose, put at stake in discussions on art. A great deal of artistic strategies since Romanticism can even principally be understood as forms of neglecting, concealing, or disrupting our expectations and common-sense notions. This means that a particular semantic gap may address us in a work of art: it may cause irritation, as it may collide with one’s frame of orientation and create the need to re-establish orientation within another frame (or even without a frame). The same is certainly true for ethical questions. However, the heuristic sense also concerns ethics. This counts for the very approach to the ethical impacts of a situation at hand, as well as for the handling with it and for learning. It counts also for ethical questions that rational ideas are formed at the break, fissure, at which the body and its perceptions, the corporeality become something for us. Just to remember, phenomenologically the break is the moment of passivity, alienation, incalculability and spontaneity deriving from the fact that we cannot grasp things directly and immediately as they are.

If we cannot grasp a thing in question, how should we then ethically judge on it? As corporeality is the primary medium of gaining orientation, a human being cannot prevent always looking for orientation in some way, this also counts for producing and perceiving art. As subjective as an artistic statement might be, with regard to the quest for orientation, it is per se also socially dimensioned. Thus, an artwork is always associated with an (most of the times invisible) artist, with the individual understanding of its contemplators, as well as with changing social and political contexts. It thus implies the ethics of individual rights. Above, the heuristic sense of aesthetic perception was introduced and explained. The possibilities for existential orientation in artistic undertakings are broad and include a great many facets of humanity, from sense and meaning to cruelty and nonsense. - How can we describe the dimensions of sense-making in the realm of art, ethics, and education?

5 Pre-Predicative Aspects of Ethics as a Task of Pedagogy

Our bodies open up, in their immediacy and authenticity, to all the fields of the social, including the diverse professional fields of history, art, and culture. As fissure or break our primary access to the world and to ourselves is always already interwoven with assessments, concepts, and ideas. Therefore, a separation of 'authentic immediacy' and discursive-conceptual mediation is not possible. We moreover judge reality on the basis of our experiences prior to our judgements. Prior experiences are not least shaped culturally and we are mostly only pre-consciously and pre-predicatively aware of them. The beginnings of acts of categorization are thus already situated in the subjectivity of impressions and in the demarcations and contrasts inherent to these.

Aesthetic perceptions are carried out in our bodies; seeing is the prevalent sense. Martin Seel (1991: 52) interprets aesthetic perceptions as distinct orientation knowledge in the form of sensitive self-presence. E.g. seeing creates images and creating images is, according to Seel (1991), a process. In this process, described as transmitted through corporeality, orientation knowledge is built up in a way that is, as said above, to a great extent beyond all possible theory. According to Christina Thürmer-Rohr (1994), there are modes of organizing things within seeing into a hierarchy; she writes: “The priority of seeing as a metaphor for the
sensible and right perception [of the world] has far-reaching consequences for interpersonal recognition. The perception efforts are taken out of a dialogical and perishable context and become ascertaining, categorizing, judging acts” (Rohr, 1994: 116). In our seeing, we create a background and foreground; we focus and shadow certain things and their characteristics; a person gets a personage. In the profile caused by seeing, also power structures, hindrances and counter-reactions are set-up or reaffirmed.

Art delineates and defines a view of the other; and in perceiving artwork images get interrelated and super- or subordinated to one another. Thus, artworks may reveal hierarchical orders of current images or constructs of a certain ‘other’ (Rohr, 1994). Art can also be read as a visualization of the images ruling a society. Therefore, our seeing is always confronted with the ethical directive to not make oneself an image of the other. Art may stress the foreign, unexpected, still undecided in the other. As well, art reveals such orders that may be social or socially critical and it may question how such arrangements are culturally framed and socially legitimated, and even propose new orders. The effect of visuality in art lies thus in creating images of ‘the foreign, unexpected, still undecided in the other,’ that are different from those familiar to us.

However, as shortly mentioned above, there are also works of art that examine certain existential possibilities of man in an inhuman or uncanny way. In contrast, pedagogy is obliged to deeply respect a child and its corporeality. The corporeality of a child has no adult power, violence or sexuality, as well as there is many developmental tasks. This constitutes the ethical border for dealing with art in the field of pedagogy. There cannot be a general answer to the question, how we can describe these limits. According to Astrid Kaiser, learning can only be initiated through the personal action modes of the learner, which fundamentally depend on his or her age. To children, the life conditions and the life conduct of adults are usually accessible only to a certain degree. A child needs the care of adults. A child will not be able to gain orientation in a situation of alienation or caused by e.g. adult forms of power, if s/he is challenged by actions and procedures that s/he is not able to carry out in a real and in a playful way.

6 Active Learning with Art

The development of one’s ethical sense for structures of power in a context of practices, bodies, and things is a central task in pedagogy. This sense is the basis for every development of competence as an active approach to situational challenges. One way to discover these diverse approaches is by means of artworks. In pedagogical regards, the first and foremost ethical dimension in this endeavor is the question of whether or not an artwork helps the individual to perceive his/her self-efficacy, that is to say, make him/her see what s/he is presumably also able to show him-/herself in terms of a “demonstrative teaching” by profiling not least social things. In this contribution we have looked at the pre-predicative aspects of ethics and aesthetics in the field of education. It is the task of the practitioner (or of a research on practices) to look at how an item comes into view in an artwork, how children deal with it, and whether or not active learning and demonstrative teaching are enacted. Observing practices as corporeal processes has been pointed out as the opportune means for modelling and investigating the development of competences. Especially, to discover the images that guide orientation and reflect on how they develop can count as one of the most important
preconditions for the achievement of competences as active, open-minded, exploratory, dialogical, and empathetic approaches to situational challenges.

Art implies ethical measures, which mainly determine our pre-conscious and pre-predicative aesthetic perceptions. It functions as a bodily mediated entrance into constitutive processes of 'the foreign, unexpected, undecided in the other.' A process of gaining orientation and learning might be initiated. In pedagogical contexts, the following questions may be asked in relation to an artwork: How is the artwork organized in terms of its striking details, or in terms of its fore- and background and (implied) hierarchies? How is (wo)man imaged? Does this match one’s own perceptions of symbolic orders? How does it question or modify these orders? According to Thürmer-Rohr, there is no limit (for adults) in studying the categorizing and judging acts that accompany our habits of seeing and one can widen this to hearing, sensing, feeling.

It has been worked out that in moments of disruption, a perceived reality can be linked to different associations than the common-sense ones. Experiences of ambiguity may merge into a certain interpretation or ethical perception of the other. The constitutive processes provoked by a work of art may cause learning, e.g. such that allows for the association of a (new) view of the other. Omissions, rifts, and ruptures then serve as a starting point for a master plan of space with its directive differences and leeways for sense-making moments, as Waldenfels (1997) points out. Respecting the children’s perceptions of the world pedagogues hereby gauge the action modes of the children entrusted to them.
References


