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Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy, and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice: A Review Essay

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Abstract

As the title suggests, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones' book *Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy, and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice* addresses a broad range of topics including aesthetic education, curriculum studies, dance and embodiment, social justice education, and identity. The breadth of exploration in the book is broad; yet salient themes emerge, come to the forefront, and at times recede only to resurface again in articles that have seemingly different topics. One salient line of exploration is how experience and a practical engagement can inform theory. Throughout the book, Blumenfeld-Jones uses his experiences as a teacher/artist/dancer/performer as a litmus test to point out the

unexamined areas of theory; thus adding new dimensions of understanding and inquiry. Integral to his work is revealing the inner, lived, and embodied dimensions experience and how these can contribute to more just, holistic, and aesthetically alive field of curriculum and education.

Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy, and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice: A Review Essay

One of the pleasures of reading a collection of essays by one author is to see both the through lines and developments of a scholar's work over time. As the title suggests, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones' book, *Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice*, encompasses a wide range of subjects relevant to aesthetic education. The challenge of reviewing a book with over twenty essays is to accurately portray the depth of the work presented while also addressing the major themes.

Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life has much to offer in terms of breadth, but also nuance as each essay expands and refines ideas presented in previous essays.

The book is organized into three sections and includes journal articles, conference papers, and texts from performative presentations that span from 1995 to the present. Each section is prefaced with an introductory essay that gives a brief synopsis of each article and how the themes being explored intermingle. I found the organization of the book to have a choreographic quality. Rather than grouping essays into sections focused on a singular theme or approach—such as curriculum, dance, or aesthetics—each section is like a dance piece that unfolds with ideas from seemingly different topics making appearances throughout each section of the book. The essays in each section relate to a few broad themes, and each article contributes new insights into this topic through a different viewpoint or perspective. For instance, in section one, *Thinking Curriculum and Aesthetics: The Ills of the World, the Loss of the Body*, Blumenfeld-Jones addresses the lack of embodied making and art practice in aesthetic education. He also looks at how practices common to the study of the arts—like play, exploration, and cultivating a sense of presence—could be applied to the curriculum field in general. He says,

If we view the act of curriculum research in the public interest from this hermeneutic, art-making anarchic vantage point, we can argue that we only learn in the presence of immersion with our materials and our vision, simultaneously. As the artist communes with his her vision and form and responds to the vagaries of the unfolding work, so as curriculum researches we become available to vision and form in the scene into which we are inquiring and respond to what we find there rather than what we wish to find there. (p. 88)

Section two, *Curriculum Critique, Curriculum Actions: Aesthetic Education and the Irony of Authenticity* looks at the role of identity and the ways in which education “might discover, enliven and strengthen that protean self.” (p. 158). In the final article of this section titled *World in a Name: Bodies and Labels*, Blumenfeld-Jones unpacks the way labels—both positive and negative—can work against individual development. He believes that through encouraging individuals to tell their stories we can begin to get past the labels that bind us. He writes, “In this listening is the first move toward a reconstruction of labels, and labeling.” (p. 272)

Section three, *Researching Through Art and Aesthetics*, explores the role of art and artistic practices in research. The first articles in this section explore the connections between traditional notions of scientific research and the artistic process, while the latter articles are examples of arts based research projects. In the preamble to *Hogan’s Dreams*, a set of poems, autobiographical stories, theoretical musings and songs developed to make sense of a Navajo curriculum development program, he makes an important distinction between art and scholarship. He writes,

...this is where art practices are distinctive from other forms of inquiry. The act of constructing the presentable form (the poem, the dance, the novel, etc.) constitutes the major practice of the inquiry as opposed to the standard social science practice in which the writing up may or may not affect the understanding of the inquirer and is, in any event, usually separate from the practice of analysis and conclusion drawing. (p. 343)

As mentioned above, one strength of the organization of the book is the links that are made as themes emerge, come to the forefront, and at times recede only to resurface again, yet through a different area of exploration. It was common while reading the book that questions which arose in one essay would be addressed in subsequent articles. Because of the circular, hermeneutic approach to Blumenfeld-Jones’ work, there were a few salient themes that permeated my notes and thoughts. It is these themes that would like to discuss below.

Blumenfeld-Jones writes from a unique perspective—an embodied perspective. The body has been a topic of discussion in education and the social sciences for the last thirty years, but the voices of actual movement experts from the practice realm of dance, sports, martial arts, etc. are rarely included in the scholarship. In equal parts, Blumenfeld-Jones draws on his experience as a dancer/artist and theoretical/methodological explorations, to understand the role of aesthetics in curriculum and education. One of the most striking ways that his embodied perspective is explored in this book are his articles that respond to the works of other scholars such as Maxine Greene, Howard Gardner, and V.A. Howard. In these articles he applies their ideas and frameworks to his own experience as a dancer in order to find the

fissures where the embodied act of making art seeps through the cracks of a more conceptual understanding. This is not done in the spirit of dismantling theory, but rather to see how the practical dimension of art making might help build a more diverse understanding.

In section one, Blumenfeld-Jones addresses aesthetic scholar Maxine Greene in an essay titled *What are the Arts For?: Maxine Greene, the Studio, and Performing Arts, and Education*.

The essay is written in the form of a letter, in which he both affirms much of Greene's work—saying, “I know that whatever thoughts I have about dance and the studio arts in general, I can only have because I have read you”—but also questions some of Greene's conclusions based on his own experience as a performing artist and educator (p. 112). He is concerned that when artists are “made special” or put on a pedestal, that it might dissuade students from seeing themselves as artists. He also questions Greene's frequent use of aesthetic examples from literature and describes his embodied connections to aesthetics.

My bodily connection to my experiences is as important as my cognitive connections as I may catch myself speaking in ways that are all too familiar, especially as I teach and begin to feel the teaching to be a performance already too well known to me.... I notice this connection because I notice my body, feel my corporal presence to be in a specific state. (p. 129)

Blumenfeld-Jones invites Green to broaden her examples of artists to include those from non-discursive modes of art like dance or music as well as acknowledging the importance of the art making process in aesthetic education.

He makes a similar argument in his article *Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence and Dance Education: Critique, Revision, and Potentials for the Democratic Ideal* when he calls into question Howard Gardner's use of exemplar dancers and athletes to describe kinesthetic intelligence rather than exploring how it is used in everyday life. Blumenfeld-Jones suggests that, “If dance were defined as paying attention to one's motion, then no matter what motion is being done, by paying attention to it one is dancing.” (p. 176) He believes this definition of dance would promote the process of self-actualization through movement rather than emphasizing that the end goal of kinesthetic knowledge is becoming an exceptional athlete or choreographer. Blumenfeld-Jones uses his experience as a dancer/choreographer to question Gardner's categorization of kinesthetic intelligence. For instance, he questions if Martha Graham, the great twentieth century modern dance choreographer, is correctly identified as being an exemplar in kinesthetic intelligence. He suggests that Graham's spatial awareness—or ability to create pattern, shape, and spatial designs on the stage—might be more integral to choreography than the kinesthetic. It is true that choreographers use their bodies to create movement, but the art of choreography is much more than devising movement. This is the

kind of nuance one can get from including the knowledge of performers and practitioners of embodied knowledge into scholarship.

Blumenfeld-Jones is careful in his critiques of other scholar's works to point out that his agenda is to illuminate an unexamined aspect of their research, and clearly acknowledges that his own readings of their work may be quite divergent than the author's intention. This is evident in his critique of V.A. Howard's book on virtuosity in his essay *Experience, Body and the Spontaneous Moment: A Meditation Upon Virtuosity and Its Possibilities for all of Us: A Review of Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts by V.A. Howard*. Blumenfeld-Jones acknowledges that Howard's agenda for the book is to get clear on the concept of virtuosity, but questions if a conceptual understanding can be reached with such an embodied concept as virtuosity without an exploration of the inner experience. In essence, he critiques the book for its missed opportunity—to explore virtuosity from both the inside realm of a practitioner working to become a virtuoso as well as a conceptual level.

I find these three articles to be central to Blumenfeld-Jones' work because they offer a new perspective to the literature on aesthetics—one that derives from the physically embodied practice of art making. Performing artists are in essence living bodies of knowledge—each body part a chapter in a collective whole that inscribes knowledge through performance and practice, not speaking or writing about it. Blumenfeld-Jones understands embodiment from the inside, and it is through his critique that the story of the actual physical body is addressed.

While many aesthetic scholars concentrate on creating opportunities for students to experience art, Blumenfeld-Jones promotes art making as a necessary part of aesthetic education. In his essay *Fostering Creativity and Aesthetic Consciousness in Teachers*, he describes a course in aesthetics for future teachers in training. In this class, students learn about the importance of art by engaging in the art making practice. He describes the reasons for this approach when he writes,

They [the students] were to come to know something of making art and its processes, they were to come to construct a self that could make art and value the experience of so doing, and they were to come to think about how art affected their community (building an ethical society, thereby, because they were paying attention to the their responsibilities toward that community). (p. 61)

Blumenfeld-Jones extends his view of the importance of practice to the curriculum field in general. In his article *The Art of Renewing Curriculum Research*, he suggests that curriculum researchers should immerse themselves, like artists, in the practical materials of their form.

He proposes it is time for practice to drive scholarly research in curriculum by using a hermeneutical approach to carefully interpret, assess, and make new developments based on what we learn from one's day-to-day practical engagement with teaching. He believes that

the combination of an artists approach to making, which focuses on being in the present and attending to evolving possibilities, paired with a hermetic approach, which focuses on interpreting the actual situation, rather than filtering it through a framework of theory, would lead to a more democratic and social justice orientated curriculum. He suggests that, “dispositions for democracy and social justice are preferable because they leave us open to the possibility of disconfirmation, the life-blood of hermeneutics and art-making.” (p. 89)

Education for social justice and democracy is a theme explored throughout the book. At times I had a difficult time fully grasping the connections between aesthetics and its role in a more justice driven curriculum, but I found with each article my understanding deepened and become more refined. I had many “aha” moments where question marks in my notes were answered by further articles in the collection. Many of my revelations came through the essay *Aesthetic Consciousness and Dance Curriculum: Liberation Possibilities for Inner City Schools*. Blumenfeld-Jones discusses a dance program he developed in an inner-city school and how social justice and equality can be enacted through aesthetics. Students were encouraged to create their own individual movement vocabularies rather than learning a specific style of dance, like ballet or tap dancing. This fostered a break down between students’ “school life” and “everyday life” as many of the students brought in movement vocabularies influenced by hip-hop or other dances learned outside of school. In his discussion of the complex relationships between popular and high art in aesthetic education, he advocates committing to a “democratic disposition” in both curriculum and interactions with students. By inviting students to bring in popular art forms, such as hip-hop, into the classroom while also exposing students to the world of high art, he believes an aesthetic awareness that is both broad and lasting is possible.

In his work, Blumenfeld-Jones navigates the tension between the artistic and scholarly process. In the introduction to section three, he explores the distinction between researchers who use art as part of their scholastic process and professional artists. He advises that those wishing to use art as a method for research should act, “as if one is going to make one’s life in that area.” (p. 280) He explains that a researcher does not need to be a particularly “good” artist, but they must study with professional artists and approach art with the same rigor and dedication.

What I found most impressive about this section of the book was Blumenfeld-Jones’ articulate discussion about both the strengths and limitations of art as a mode of research. He believes that the strength of artistic or performative research is that it makes “new dimensions of a phenomenon available.” (p. 305) Seeing an idea explored through an artistic medium such as dance, music, or creative writing has the potential to shake-up our frame of reference because it looks at the issue from a different medium of expression. Blumenfeld-Jones includes a superb example of this in a work of fiction titled *Two Stories* that explores the internal

dialogue of both a student and teacher whose lives intermingle. What the reader gains through fictional prose is an imaginative rendering of the complex inner dialogues that a student and teacher's have while trying to understand their identity in an ever-shifting world. This gives the reader a richer sense of the internal worlds of both teachers and students that might help explain why they make the choices that they do.

Blumenfeld-Jones also addresses the limitations of art as a form of research. He clearly describes the artistic process and the artist's responsibility to the work of art rather than to the topic it wishes to address. He says, "The insights discovered through the practice of dance as any art form are only available through the practice and the practice focuses on making art, not on coming to understand." (p. 322) In other words, if art is to provide us with new ways of seeing the world, then the artist must focus their attention on making a work of art that speaks with its own voice, rather than being an instrument to understand something else.

Blumenfeld-Jones does an exemplary job of mixing both art and scholarship in his paper/performance *Dance as a Mode of Research*. Through this presentation he educates the audience about dance through combining spoken word and movement. It has been my experience that students, friends, and scholars often report feeling uncomfortable with encounters with art because they "don't understand it." Blumenfeld-Jones translates the kinetic, visceral, and compositional aspect of dance into a clear and articulate prose that I can only imagine was enhanced through his performance of movement in the actual presentation. This translation of dance into a verbal expression that gives voice to a visceral experience is an art form in and of itself, and is one of the most eloquent and thoughtful renditions of dance into words I have come across.

In closing, I would like to comment on what I found to be the single most pervasive theme in the book—that our experiential lives, or rather, who we are as individuals is important. When you read Blumenfeld-Jones' work, you feel that he is talking specifically to you, not some abstract audience of educational researchers. I believe this is due to his frequent use of his own autobiography in his work. He recounts his own experiences, encounters, and stories to both identify his positionality in regards to the subject he is exploring, but more importantly to remind the reader that the personal is important; that we are not anonymous researchers, but individuals that are drawn to subjects by our own lived experiences.

In his letter addressed to Maxine Greene, Blumenfeld-Jones begins with, "You don't know me but I know you, at least I know something of you through your work..." (p.111) After reading *Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice*, I felt that I knew Donald. Moreover, I had a burning desire to write him my own letter, or better yet, sit down and have a long discussion over coffee.

This book offers a skillful example of how experience can serve as an important tool for understanding, and adding new perspectives to education, aesthetics, and dance.

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About the Reviewer

Kimber Andrews is a PhD student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where she teaches courses in video production, and dance. Her research interests include embodiment in education, dance, and how to live an aesthetic life. She has an MFA in dance from the UIUC and had a career as a professional dancer and teaching artist before returning to graduate school.

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