

Aesthetic & Pedagogical Compasses:  
The Self in Motion

# *Aesthetic & Pedagogical Compasses: The Self In Motion*

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## **Abstract**

This is a story of composing and being composed by “Aesthetics and curriculum”, a course I taught for 28 years at the University of Illinois. The course aimed at living with questions, as Rilke famously suggested, rather than seeking ultimate answers; heightened experience, wonder and exploration rather than mastery; creating openings rather than pre-destined knowledge. Tuning inward and outward were complementary processes that supported each other in a dynamic conversation involving artworks, the self, and aesthetic theories. We learned about ourselves in the process of encountering artworks and aesthetic theories, and, in turn, the encounter with our individual selves was crucial to the understanding of artwork and aesthetic theories. The aspiration to connect, to open ourselves to how artwork can expand us, rather than mastering it, built on Martin Buber’s notion of “I-Thou”.

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Opening, to artworks, to aesthetic theories, to our selves, is not to be rushed. It requires that we stay with the process and give it time so that what we encounter can speak to us. The prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that is acknowledged to cultivate fresh perception, observation, and conceptualization in qualitative research is equally essential in the journey of aesthetics, going beyond formal knowledge and artistic skills to a connected inquiry (Bresler, 2006).

In C&I 581 teaching and learning were intertwined. I was the one composing the syllabus and deciding on reading materials, framing key questions for classes and assignments and facilitating discussions. I shaped this course, and the course shaped me, in a process of dynamically changing teaching and self reminiscent of Escher's (1948) self-referential hand drawing (<https://moa.byu.edu/m-c-eschers-drawing-hands/>) (Bresler, 2008). It was the students who brought the theories, themes and issues to life, taking the buffet of artistic experiences and readings to their own corners of the world with emergent meaning. Reminded of Parker Palmer's claim that "We teach who we are" (Palmer, 1998), I realize now that we also *become* what we teach. This class helped launch me to the next stage of my life, with the arts continuing to be a profoundly wise teacher.

Composing the course involved an interplay of moving back and forth between pedagogical and aesthetic compasses. I encountered the concept of compassing in the work of narrative, folklore, and children's literature researcher Betsy Hearne. In *A Narrative Compass* (Hearne, 2009), Hearne refers to stories that inspire and shape professional identity. Inviting my students, mostly pre- and in-service teachers, to tune to their own compasses through responses to their chosen and prescribed artworks and theories that offered divergent, sometimes conflicting understandings of art, we aimed towards teaching styles that were tuned to their own compasses and commitments.

### **Shifts in teaching paradigms: Artistic and pedagogical**

Courses, like people, are shaped by disciplinary as well as personal contexts, including those practices that vex our sensitivities and values. In my earlier role as a piano teacher in Israel, I aimed to redress what was lacking in my own formal piano lessons, a sense of ownership and voice. While I strove to connect my students to the music they played, my teaching stayed within the hard boundaries of classical music (Detels, 1999), essentially giving little space for their voices through improvisation or composition. In the tradition of classical music, my repertoire-centered teaching emphasized skill and mastery, performing this Bach Fugue and that Beethoven piano sonata; analyzing forms and appreciating the intricacies of recurrent motifs, changing keys, and the dynamic forms and harmonies of a piece. Here, the knowledge revolved around mastery of musical pieces aiming to combine technical skills with a mind/heart expressivity.

Teaching music theory at the Open University was different in that it emphasized the abstraction of concepts. Following the textbook provided by the university, I taught the framework for Western music from Baroque to late Romanticism and beyond, including modes, harmonic progressions, and the architectural structure of the circle of fifths with its inner logic and intricate relationships. I enjoyed both kinds of teaching, connecting with the type of knowledge they represented as part of my identity of a performer, music theorist, and a musicologist.

My subsequent position of directing musical concerts at the Tel-Aviv Museum allowed me to branch out to a broader experience and understanding of education. Composing concert seasons and curating spaces for musical experiences included auditioning soloists and chamber ensembles and writing repertoire-centered program notes that alerted audiences to musical style and form, contextualizing the performed pieces in the composer's life and historical events of the time. My emerging interests in crossing artistic disciplines[1]-- music, visual arts, theater, dance -- led me to initiate concert series with lectures by university professors in History, Arts History, and Musicology that presented big ideas and values manifested in different artistic media.

Curating aesthetic spaces that bridged artistic disciplines would re-emerge years later in the design of the Aesthetics and Curriculum course.

The shift of teaching paradigms was initiated when I left the identity of a musician and musicologist, moving from Israel to Stanford, California and embarking on a degree in Education with a focus on arts and aesthetic education. Though the transition felt abrupt, I now recognize the presence of aesthetics and a commitment to education broadly conceived, regarding the arts as heightened experiences and rich spaces for inquiry, evident in my museum work. In my first research assignment with Elliot Eisner, tasked with writing a case-study of an elementary school class and confronted with my lack of knowledge in the fields of curriculum and qualitative research, I conceptualized the curriculum of that class as I would a musical piece, attending to its temporal form, rhythm, orchestration, melody, counterpoint and dynamics. It was then that I realized the (implicit) lessons of performance and music theory, teaching me to tune into temporal reality – the reality of classrooms that underlie all personal and social experience--attending to its inherent rhythms, forms, dynamics and harmonies (Bresler, 2019.) This conceptualization alerted me to the wisdom of musical dimensions underlying educational processes and, as importantly, the personal voice and interpretive possibilities of qualitative inquiry.[2]

The readings I encountered in Eisner's class – Leo Tolstoy, John Dewey, Suzanne Langer—were different from my experience of the aesthetic readings featured in my earlier Philosophy courses in Tel-Aviv University, -- dry and disconnected from my life. Being introduced in Nel Noddings' class to Martin Buber's notion of relationship with art and the world (Buber, 1971) was animating and generative. Grounded in my new experiences of educational and social science (rather than musicological and archival) research, I perceived how Dewey and Buber were intimately connected to daily life and grappling with how to live meaningfully. The vibrancy of these ideas was essential in shaping aspirations for C&I 581.

Another formative body of knowledge that shaped the Aesthetic and Curriculum class were the worlds of arts education, a near yet incongruous relative to classical music and arts. Arts education is embedded within the larger domain of formal schooling and its distinct cultures, including its traditions of curricula, pedagogies, and evaluation. Learning about arts education and its contexts through courses as well as through research projects at Stanford and later Illinois made the strange (arts education) familiar and at the same time, rendered the familiar art worlds that continued to be my home strange, their normalcy less of a given.

Hired by the department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois to teach aesthetic education, I titled my course "Aesthetic foundations of education". After all, that was what drew me to educational research and education. When told that courses titled "foundation" were the domain of our philosophy of education department I changed the course title to "Aesthetics and curriculum", with the understanding of curriculum as a path broadly interpreted. That course, and other courses on arts and education that I developed and taught at Illinois[3], revolved around my fascination with what the arts could do for us when we allow them to speak to us. I recognized the power of aesthetic theories to pose compelling questions and tune our attention to encounters with art, and also the centrality of the voice of the self to conduct a dynamic conversation between specific artwork and theories.

If the curation of artistic experiences at the Tel-Aviv Museum was an early harbinger of this course, an important support for the focus on experience was my encounter with Buddhism. Five days after I deposited my dissertation in June 1987 I treated myself to a five-day silent Vipassana retreat. The inquiry-based, experiential foundation of mindfulness and the notion of a self that is fluid, interconnected with situations and encounters, made sense. The Buddhist recommendation that we remain present and curious about what we encounter rather than resist it--that is, that we learn from it--resonated with my credo about the arts. The caution about holding tightly to ideologies of any kind, including aesthetic ideologies, was a useful one. The process of integrating these teachings with my thinking and being was gradual. However, the recognition that both mindfulness and the arts facilitate a space of contemplating experience rather than being submerged by it inspired a cultivation of awareness that encompassed cognition and affect, mindful of the different senses.

Extended spaces for encounter with aesthetic relationships, allowing these relationships to unfold, was crucial. I realized that slowing down, and dedicating time for an encounter, honored both the art and the class as beholders in the journey of vitality and growth. It is when we are willing to stay with the questions (Rilke, 1997), when we are willing to encounter dimensions of our inner being (London, 1989, 1), “to fathom not only “what’s out there” but “what’s in here” (London, 1989, 17), when we are in a state of a “lingering caress” and “mutual absorption” (Armstrong, 2000), when we relax from the need to make sense (Biesta, 2013), that the world can address us. The readings of Rilke, London, Armstrong, and Biesta came years after I started teaching this class. Here, teaching came first, generating awareness and articulation. Only then was I able to greet those big ideas by Rilke, London, Armstrong and Biesta as kindred companions.

Extended spaces came in different forms and shapes. I always started my first class with presenting an artwork and going in a circle (multiple circles) to elicit responses to guided questions. The art varied--from figurative to abstract, from Renaissance Breughel to 20<sup>th</sup> century Rousseau, and Klee and contemporary Terry Barrett and Botero--but the key questions stayed the same. They progressed from descriptive (“What do you see?”) through active and playful (“What would you remove from this picture?” or “Enter the picture, where will you be? What will you be able to observe from there?”). They ranged from interpretive/synthesizing (“title the picture”) to dialogical/phenomenological (“what do you say to the picture, what does it say to you?”). The richness of students’ perspectives and responses enabled us as a group to see more. Listening often allowed me to expand my own perceptions in ways I couldn’t do on my own. It was the ability to listen to the artwork, listen to other students, and relate to their responses contrapuntally that made for a complex, multifaceted encounter with the artwork, complemented by art history and art appreciation resources. Recognizing the importance of listening to peers, I encouraged referring to others’ contributions in both class discussion and in papers by “counting” it towards the grade, just as referring to a reading did.

While the concept of *respect* (e.g. for artwork and for others’ opinions) is a useful starting point, I have always perceived it as cool, polite, more dutiful than engaged, indeed, a starting rather than end point. The focus on sharing personal observations of artworks with depth and honesty, acknowledging individual contexts that affect interpretations, is more conducive to relationship. The differences of perspectives and interpretations testified to the power of art to expand dialogues.

Other “slow spaces” included assigning students to explore Krannert Art Museum, identify artworks that “called them,” and spend 40 minutes of immersion, close observation and inner dialogue with each; to attend dance and theater performances with follow-up class discussions, often with guest presenters, mostly creators of these performances, before or after the event; and to write lengthy individual papers after each encounter as space to explore and articulate insights. The focus was not on developing skills or mastering information. Rather, it was the grounded cultivation of diverse aesthetic sensibilities and attempt to communicate them through language, an impossible task, but one that carries tremendous educational opportunities. The artistic events ranged in genres, formal and expressive qualities, and traditions, from classic or cutting-edge dance, theater and music to ethnic and folk performances. The Black Violin concert exemplified emerging hybrids of classical and rock. Attending to African and Latino performances, being introduced to Islamic and Japanese gardens and tea ceremony, sensitized us to rich cultural sensibilities and traditions. Humperdinck’s Hansel and Gretel opera connected to the arts of children’s books and fairy tales. Visits by eminent creators and artists, from choreographers Ralph Lemon, Jan Erkert, and Mark Morris, to visual artists Billy Jackson, Kimiko Gunji, and Stacey Robinson, poet and author/scholar Betsy Hearne, violinist Daniel Heifetz and members of the Sphinx Orchestra with their Founder Aaron Dworkin, and master educators Kimber Andrews, Koji Matsunobu, Patricia Pinciotti, Anne Sautman, Eve Harwood, and Jean Korder expanded our perspectives on what it may mean to inquire, to be engaged, as a creator, performer, communicator, and educator in the broader sense of the word. We realized what could be gained by giving artwork the respect of time and attention.

Along with attending to highly sophisticated art at the reverent, distinctive spaces of Krannert Performing Center and the Art Museum, the aim was to bring a heightened aesthetic perception to everyday life. Heightened perception of the everyday needs cultivation. All too often, as John Dewey observed, the common act of recognition hinders perception. “Recognition” Dewey wrote, “is perception arrested before it has the chance to develop freely” (1934, 52).[4] The ordinary, British Philosopher Peter de Bolla remarks, is often too close for attention, extraordinary in its ability to go unremarked. The everyday has an “uncanniness of . . . proximity,” to slip *behind* attention (de Bolla, 2001, 64). It is as if, in order to survive a bombardment of stimuli, we need to construct a mode of inattention, creating a domain too close for the reach of attention. The “aesthetic habit” cultivated in arts centers and the reading of poetry (for example, Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Socks” and Mary Oliver’s “Can You Imagine”) supports perception in everyday life. Our communal eating where each of us took turns bringing food, practical in a 3-hour class, was accompanied by generating nuanced descriptions of tastes and the visual, textural, and gastronomic qualities of the food that aimed to include all the senses in a comprehensive understanding of aesthetics.

These experiences heightened the realization that classes are always embodied, characterized by distinct choreographies (Bresler, 2004), evoking interest in felt sense. There is considerable movement even in the most restrictive classes. Students interact with their laptops or notebooks, raise their hands, walk to the board, go to the bathroom, and help the teacher distribute materials, including, in our class, food. The “null requirement” in this class of *not* using cell phones unless in an emergency situation, contributed, I believed, to a heightened concentration. In addition to these instrumental aspects of class choreography, we used the body for expressive purposes, integrating movement as part of somatic explorations.

In these processes, course readings applied to the grounded and the personal. Knowledge about art can shape and expand perception and experience, or not. Depending on the nature of the art encountered, knowledge often came after an initial personal dialogue, for example, at the art museum or in class, with the extra time to engage. At other times knowledge came beforehand, providing a framework to facilitate the initial encounter. In an academic context where knowledge is prioritized over experience, this course aimed to cultivate personal habits of inquiry and connection (Bresler, 2006) with knowledge as supporting, but not overshadowing experience.

I used the structured mechanism of papers to make sure that people took time to reflect on the artistic experience, that the experience was core but the readings and class discussions worked in tandem. The focus was not on “liked/disliked” but on the depth of our learning from the arts and from in and out of class experiences, expanding the same descriptive, interpretive and dialogic lenses practiced in the first class. The papers were graded on depth, on evidence of personal investment in “seeing more” and understanding more, on being able to perceive nuances and become interested. My colleagues used to be puzzled that I enjoyed reading students’ papers as much as I did. I always felt richer when invited to see an artwork, often one that I might not particularly care for, or an application of an aesthetic theory, through another’s engaged vision.

### **The forces, pulls and pushes, in shaping a course**

Most writing, I realized years ago, is generated because there is something we push against: Dewey’s notion of art as *experience* (1934), for instance, contrasted with an inert object of artwork; or Robert Solomon’s (1999) notion of philosophy as joyous compared to intellectually lifeless arguments that are a common practice are two examples. This was true for the course. What was I pushing against? The push, I discovered, was against my early experience of being taught piano in ways that created an oppressive and rigid experience. I was pushing against the dichotomy I experienced in my Philosophy degree, where the cerebral aesthetic texts felt disconnected from the vitality of life’s key questions. I was pushing against ready-made knowledge versus the mobilization of one’s whole being to draw fresh meanings out of the encounter.

It was not only academic learning that I was pushing against. My research in schools clearly pointed to the prevalent practice of arts education imitating the academic curriculum in both structures and pedagogies (Bresler, 1994); and to the practice of the arts as subservient to academic knowledge (Bresler, 1995). “Making art” in schools was too often about surface engagement rather than a space to connect (though not always--there were inspiring exceptions in all arts disciplines). The notion that the arts in school systems could and should connect much more vibrantly and personally was particularly urgent in teaching Masters Certification students in the College of Education for whom this course became a requirement in the mid 1990s.[5] Quite a few of these graduate students had no background or interest in the arts. When structuring artistic encounters, I hoped for experiences that students could connect to their own voices and expand their visions of who they wanted to be. Interestingly, I recognized that this aspiration was also apt for those masters and doctoral students from the School of Art and Design and the School of Music who had extensive experience in their chosen art discipline but often little experience with other arts.

Every teacher has an age-group focus, whether it’s kindergarten, fifth, or high school junior. Every teacher teaches in a specific context. Each level and context come

with their demands and expertise. As part of my research projects I had the opportunity of observing diverse settings and age levels, from early childhood, to elementary and secondary, from urban to rural, from ordinary to exceptional. Still, my own setting and expertise centered in higher education with the specific communities of students I had. We discussed in class what aesthetic and artistic experiences could mean for different age groups, in different settings and circumstances; we recognized that there were no recipes that would hold across all contexts. Aspiring for meaningful connections between teacher, students and aesthetic experiences implies relationships that are open, tuned and investigational. The students in C & I 581, in their present and future roles as teachers, would be engaged in a continuous process of navigation to adapt contents and pedagogies meaningful to them and to their own present and future communities.

Buddhist scholar and teacher Stephen Batchelor observes that “The artist’s dilemma and the meditator’s are, in a deep sense, equivalent. Both are repeatedly willing to confront an unknown and to risk a response that they cannot predict or control. Both are disciplined in skills that allow them to remain focused on their task and to express their response in a way that will illuminate the dilemma they share with others.” (Batchelor, 1997). This observation, I believe, is equally true for teachers. Providing some ideas and some skills for the students in this course was useful. More fundamental was setting us all on a path of unfolding teaching and learning through encounters and queries, and a taste of the joy of possible expansions through venturing into the unknown. This was highlighted in the first, prolonged encounter with the art, with no information on the art presented, where the focus was intensified perception of artwork and other students’ responses, and where my own role was responding and improvising based on students’ responses to model an interchange that is based on attentiveness rather than preconceived knowledge. The inclusion of guest speakers opened me as much as my students to novel, firsthand vistas of relationship with arts, including the expression of struggle in terms of race and what these struggles meant to artists; or our classroom participation in movement exercises that were out of my skills and expertise and proved as transformative for me as they were for the students.

On a fundamental level, I was astounded that I enjoyed teaching aesthetics as much as I did. I recognized that no matter how extensively I read, my knowledge of the vast and evolving aesthetic and arts education field was painfully limited. I delighted in the genuine, conversational nature of classes, where students assumed the role of playmates. Related surprises were about the consistent expansion of seeing that happened through giving an artwork time, whether attending to it as a maker or as a viewer. Just as the Fox advised the Little Prince (Saint Exupery, 1943), it is the time you invest in something that creates a relationship. This advice is consistent with Buber’s notion of I-Thou, highlighting the genuine encounter that touches and transforms. In teaching this class for nearly 30 years, using some of the same questions and some of the same readings applied to different students’ communities and performances, the encounters felt fresh and recharging inviting me to develop my own seeing and understanding. I recognized a relationship that I came to think of a “three-pronged relationships” (Bresler, 2013): intensifying relationships to the artwork through students’ eyes, and at the same time intensifying relationships to the students through sharing an artwork.

### **The next stage: Aesthetic foundations of life**

What I wished for my students became my own most profound learning. I learned in this course that our teacher and learner selves can merge, that I can continue to work with the teaching of life and respond in my own classroom of one through awareness, expression, and creation. This Aesthetics and curriculum class deepened my experience in recognizing the vitality of an “unknowing” mindset (Bresler, 2019). The experience of not knowing, as both a teacher and a learner, supported my move to the emerging next stage of my “Adulthood II” (Bateson, 2010), a second kind of adulthood that aspires toward wisdom and, for me, is invigorated by a different, gentler and deepened kind of energy.

I was enriched by teaching C&I 581 for nearly 30 years, with the special companionship of wholehearted, committed students, teachers, and the guest presenters/artists who contributed to these classes. Lessons from the course have followed me into a present stage of expanding my voice through new forms of creation and taking education beyond formal institutions into emerging life journeys. I draw, from my teaching experience, a foundational triangle that includes nurturing structures and sequences that invite open-endedness and emergence, shared by a community of engaged artists-explorers. These excursions draw on my beginnings, those left many years ago, with improvisations on the piano, as well as those (still) beloved Israeli folksongs, and venturing into hybrid forms of classical-cum-improvisation. My emerging directions increasingly involve visual explorations with an interplay of colours, images, and writing—all reaching *out* and *in* to uncharted landscapes, guided by an inner compass tuned to aesthetics and wisdom.

### **Endnotes**

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[1] Manifested in my master thesis in musicology, conducted at the same time (Bresler, 2016)

[2] I continued to grapple with “lessons from music” (2005), curious about additional teachings from music and the arts, including the attunement that happens in both chamber music and open-ended interviews, and the sense of improvisation that is generated by this attunement. Attunement and improvisation proved central in teaching the Aesthetics and Curriculum class.

“Arts in elementary and early childhood”, and “Arts education in international settings”

[3] “Arts in elementary and early childhood”, and “Arts education in international settings”

[4] For an elaboration of this point, see, Higgins, 2007.

[5] The course had no requirement for previous arts background.

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