

“The cultural rucksack” and aesthetic experience – students’ accounts as seen in a pragmatist perspective

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Den kulturelle Skolesekken (the cultural rucksack, hereafter abbreviated DKS) is an arts program for schools in Norway, which began as a nationwide project in 2003. Along with two other arts programmes the *Ungdommens kulturmonstring* (the Norwegian Youth Festivals of Art) and the *Kulturskolen* (the municipal music and art schools), the government seeks to educate the young Norwegians to and through the arts. As the two latter projects are based on voluntary participation, the goal of DKS is to make sure that students throughout their first 10 or 13 years of schooling meet the arts through performances with and by professional artists. Since the project’s initial, experimental phase in the beginning of the 1990s, it has grown into becoming a politically well recognised and prioritised field, which nowadays receives substantial and even increasing governmental funding.

The parliamentary report *Stortingsmelding nr. 8 (2007-2008)* states that the focus of DKS is to provide young people with aesthetic experiences. This goes well with the government’s aim of educating “to” the arts. Meanwhile, the report also states that the goal of DKS is that students gain an understanding of the arts, so as to “prepare them for the challenges in the knowledge-society” (St.meld. nr. 8 (2007-2008), p. 7). This may be understood as education “through” the arts, and hence the report places itself in-between the dichotomy of education to and through the arts (Nielsen, 1998). Attending to the theories of John Dewey (Dewey, 1916), I will argue that these two educational discourses are mutually dependent on one another. Also, aesthetic experience is a contested term in the philosophy music education. I will discuss this in relation to the pragmatist aesthetics of Dewey, and Richard Shustermans reinterpretation of it.

Little research has been conducted with respect to the DKS, and the accounts of youngsters and children have not been paid much attention. Still, the report *Forskning og evaluering av DKS* (Research on and evaluation of DKS) stresses the importance of research in which students are allowed as study participants and interviewees. With this in mind, my main research question is: *What kinds of aesthetic experiences do students have when encountering the DKS?* Further, student participation has been a recurring theme in the evaluations and

research previously conducted. The central documents do not say whether student participation is desirable or not, however, after a major evaluation of the DKS on government assignment, there has been discussions concerning the use of “monological” versus “dialogical” performances. “Dialogical” is a term used in this evaluation and implies student participation in one way or another. In my dissertation, I will explore how or if student participation affect the aesthetic experience. This will be made by selecting participants of two kinds; one group encountering a “monological” DKS performance, and another attending a “dialogical” one. The students’ accounts of their aesthetic experiences will make the grounds for a comparative analysis.

I will produce data for my analysis by making several qualitative interviews with the selected students in these two groups. Also, in order to have a reference to what the students have experienced, I will observe the performances myself. Some teachers decide to have a post performance talk with the students (which is recommended in the parliamentary report). My interviews will be made after this, and hopefully both of my groups will have this talk, as it helps them to reflect upon their experiences before my interview. According to Dewey, reflection on experience gives the experience a higher value, so these post performance talks in the classroom will probably influence the students’ experiences. This may also be the case when I interview the students. I do not have an unmediated access to their experiences, and there is no aesthetic experience cut off from the environment (Dewey, 1916). I will try to be aware of this and see if the students realize something new about their experiences during the interview. The worst case scenario is that the interview enhances the experience in a way that would not have happened otherwise. The best case scenario is that I will see a possibility of creating better experiences for students encountering the DKS.

Dewey’s take on experience and democratic education, and Richard Shusterman’s pragmatist aesthetics form the theoretical framework of my dissertation. I will discuss the terms aesthetic experience and monological/dialogical performance through the thoughts of these two pragmatist philosophers. In addition, these theories will serve as points of departure for developing my interview guide.

Central to Dewey’s use of the term education is reproduction (though not in a determined or closed way; Reproduction also includes renewal and transformation) of the society. In his book *Democracy and Education*, he claims that what reproduction and nutrition is for

physical life, education is for social life. The most primitive societies teach their newcomers how the society works, and what they know are the best ways to cope in their environment. In today's societies, we do the same, and this is what Dewey names education. What happens in schools, he calls formal education. Dewey explicitly uses the word "societies" instead of "society". He acknowledges that we learn in our respective environments, through our acquaintances and our immediate physical environment, including "the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings" (Dewey, 1916: p. 256). Dewey stresses the environment: "the environment consists of the sum total of conditions which are concerned in the execution of the activity characteristic of a living being" (Dewey, 1916: p. 24) in addition to the importance of the social environment (similar to discourse and signifying practices), and that "truths" are of *purpose* in coping with life (Dewey, 1916). In my dissertation this will be of relevance as I have to take socio-cultural differences into account when interviewing students and analyzing the empirical data. A student who is familiar with jazz music, will probably have more related past experiences to connect to a present aesthetic experience than a student who has not. There is also the possibility of significant socio-cultural differences between the two schools I am going to visit. One school might for example be more positive to DKS in general and vice versa. This is something I might be able to gather from interviewing the students.

According to Dewey, experience is central to education. It is the result of the meeting of the whole organism in all of its functions with the on-goings of the world about him as he participates in it. Dewey calls this the interaction of organism and environment (Dewey, 1916: p. 22). Though, he further argues, that the mere interaction is not enough to make it an experience. He gives the example of a child who sticks its fingers into a flame: "It is not an experience when a child merely sticks its fingers into a flame; it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence" (Dewey, 1916: p. 117). I gather from this statement that since a person must actively connect movement and undergoing, *an* experience according to Dewey is a part of the person's consciousness when it is connected with past and future. Shusterman explains in what he calls one common sense of experience, which is a kind of peak experience, a bit like the common sense of the Norwegian term "opplevelse": "that which refers to a memorable and ultimately satisfying episode of living, one that stands out from the humdrum flow of life as "*an* experience"..." (Shusterman, 2000: p. 27). Therefore an interviewee in my research will be aware of having an experience in relation to DKS, though measuring the comparative value of it is problematic (Shusterman,

2000: p. 56). When Dewey speaks of *an* experience, it is the equivalent of an aesthetic experience, and he claims that the value of *an* experience is determined by how well it is connected with the past and future. “We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (Dewey, 1916: p. 36-7). This means that an experience is of higher value the more it is connected to former experiences, and also the more it is connected to its consequences (the future) as stated above. My interviewees, as I interpret it, should be able to relate their experience with past experiences and see consequences of it in the future if they have had a significant aesthetic experience in relation to DKS, at least as I am going to use Dewey’s interpretation of aesthetic experience in my dissertation.

Dewey says that there are two interconnected factors of aesthetic experience; you do something (doing), and something is done to you (undergoing). Either way it is a relation to which you apply meaning to understand yourself and the world around you. Too much of either doing or undergoing interferes with the experience. Excess of doing leaves everything on the surface, and in an excess of undergoing nothing takes root in the mind (Dewey, 1934: p. 46). This may be a comment on the dialogical and monological performance. A monological performance can be understood as undergoing, while a dialogical one as both doing and undergoing, though Dewey argues that even reception depends on the way the organism reacts and responds (Dewey, 1934: p. 256). There is another Deweyan argument that can be used for claiming that dialogical performances should make the ground for better aesthetic experiences than monological ones. This is the argument that when the body is inhibited, as may be the case when students are told to be quiet, without much movement, it may prevent the occurrence of aesthetic experience in the Deweyan sense of the word. After all, according to the parliamentary reports, referred to above, the children are supposed to learn the “right” way to watch a performance. Dewey discusses this among other things when talking about the results of the parting of mind and body in the dualist tradition from cartesianism. He claims that “the neglected body, having no organized fruitful channels of activity, breaks forth, without knowing why or how, into meaningless boisterousness, or settles into equally meaningless fooling...” (Dewey, 1916: p. 118). It is a definite possibility of this happening when a child is undergoing a “monological” performance, which might take the attention away from the performance. As said earlier, these terms “monological” and “dialogical” performances are used in the evaluation report of the DKS. I will further discuss

the possibility of a “monological” performance in a Deweyan outlook, and in relation to this, try to see what it may constitute in my analysis of the students’ accounts.

References

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