

Aesthetic Experience for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Using Art to Teach the Concept of 'Discipline' to Student Teachers.

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Abstract

The study herein suggests the application of experiential methods in the training procedure of teachers, within the framework of their initial education in universities. It concerns a learning and teaching method, which is based on the aesthetic experience of learners through the observation of art. Deriving from the field of adult education, this method is based on the theoretical approach of transformative learning, according to which, the way reality is interpreted, is defined by the individuals' perceptions. The main objective in adult learning is to help learners reexamine the foundation of their dysfunctional perceptions, assisting them in questioning the validity of those that have become problematic, in order to form a more functional perception of the world and their position in it. The procedures mentioned above could be achieved by critical thinking, which is defined as the reevaluation process of perceptions and values, according to which we comprehend reality and we act. The 'Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience' method is based on this idea. According to this method, art is used as a tool for a critical approach and creative thinking, as well as reflection on a specific teaching topic. Works of art can facilitate thinking, through the critical aspect they require for their interpretation. The application was carried out on students of the department of educational studies at a Greek regional university. The topic which was analyzed through art, was the notion of 'discipline' and was part of a wider range of applications that concern the process of learning. The assessment of this application showed that the achievement of the teaching goals set originally, was facilitated through the observation of art. It also demonstrated that it should be considered as an example of an alternative, as well as an effective, teaching method.

The present study states the necessity to apply innovative teaching methods in higher education, with emphasis on the education of future teachers. The application of a learning-teaching method is suggested, which is based on the aesthetical experience of the learners through the observation of artworks. The aim of this method is the development of the student's critical thinking.

In the following report, a brief reference is made to the meaning of critical reflection in higher education, especially in the case of student teachers, as well as the role that art can play in this procedure. Subsequently, the method used is presented, followed by a description of an application on student teachers of a regional Greek University. The main subject of the application is the concept of discipline in education. Finally, the evaluation of the method is attempted, as well as the wording of some conclusions that occur.

Critical Reflection in Adult and Higher Education

Deriving from the field of adult education, the method that has been introduced by Kokkos (2010) is based on the theoretical approach of transformative learning. According to this approach, the way we interpret reality is determined by our habits of mind [Lintzeris, 2007:48-49]. The main goal of adult learning is to help learners reevaluate the foundations of their dysfunctional perceptions and question the validity of those that are problematic, in order to develop a more viable image of the world and their position in it [Kokkos, 2005:75-76]. The means to achieve that is reflection, the process of

reexamining perceptions and values, which form the way we understand reality and act [Mezirow, 1998].

The need for the development of critical reflection is also noted in the higher education framework, where the reconsideration of traditional educational methods seems imperative. It is important at this level of education, to evaluate knowledge before endorsing it, as the students are tomorrow's citizens, who will be undertaking essential roles in society.

The preparation for student teachers however, is of even greater importance, for as soon as they complete their studies, they will join the professional field and start teaching. At this point it is important to highlight that teachers are exposed to practices throughout their lives as primarily and higher education students. These practices function as an endless source of stereotypes, attitudes and behaviors [Greene, 1991: 8-12]. This means that they recall practices from different educational frameworks where they were students, and incorporate them in their roles as teachers, constantly affecting their professional identity [Karalis, Sotiropoulos & Kampeza, 2007: 150-151]. Consequently, any inefficient practices that are considered to be valid in the field of education are perpetuated.

Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience

The method of 'Transformative learning through aesthetic experience', presented by Kokkos [2010], came as an answer to this issue. According to this method, art is used as tool for critical and creative thinking, as well as reflecting on teaching matters. The reason art is used is that artworks can facilitate reflection through the critical view needed for their interpretation. The vague limits of art help us transfer good reflecting characteristics that are developed in the framework of art, to the broader world [Perkins, 1994: 89]. The work of art functions as a means to express the messages that are embodied within. These messages are broader and deeper compared to the usual everyday experiences, and for this reason we need to activate our imagination to interpret [Dewey, 1934: 284-286].

The principles the method is based on are related to [Kokkos, 2010: 9-13]:

- The use of the aesthetic experience without replacing other methods for the development of critical thinking.
- The ideas of Freire on approaching ideas holistically, through the aesthetic experience.
- The use of Perkins technique on the systematic observation of works of art.
- The realization that not all learners are always familiar with the arts. Consequently, the trainer must make an effort for the participation and understanding of the art work by all learners.

The stages of the teaching method are:

1. *Identification of educational needs.* At this stage an effort is made in order to determine the existing needs on critical inquiry of the participant's stereotypical assumptions on a specific subject, while an interest on the subject is also encouraged.
2. *Inquiry on the participants' assumptions.* The participants express their assumptions on the subject, individually and as a group.
3. *Formulation of subthemes/ questions revealed.* The trainer examines the answers and identifies the subthemes that should be addressed holistically and critically, in order to reevaluate the opinions stated.
4. *Selection of works of art to serve as a stimulus for the elaboration of the subthemes.* Several works of art are selected by the educator that will be used as an incentive for the elaboration of the subthemes. The works of art can be paintings, sculptures, photographs, literature, poetry, theatre, music etc., while their meanings should be connected to the subthemes.
5. *Presentation and elaboration of artwork.* By gradually going deeper and analyzing the works of art, the participants are able to approach the various subthemes from different perspectives.
6. *After completing the procedure,* the opportunity is given to the participants to reevaluate their initial assumptions and observe any changes.

Application and first findings

The method was applied to student teachers of a regional Greek University (Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras). The issue that was addressed through art was the concept of 'discipline', as part of a wider cycle of applications concerning the learning process. The research is still in progress; here we note some of the first results.

The first meeting began with an introductory discussion on learning. This was the first stage of the teaching method and its goal was to identify educational needs and to encourage learners develop an interest on the subject. During this discussion, an attempt was made to emphasize on their experiences of the past which they bring to the learning process as learners. Several views formulated in the educational field were mentioned. Though the conversation, stereotypical and standard assumptions were revealed. Therefore, it was essential that those assumptions were examined in depth.

After the first discussion, the second stage followed, where the learners were asked to formulate their assumptions on the subject, in a more systematic way, individually and in writing. After that, they expressed their views and shared them with the group. The analytical elaboration of the student's answers lead to the identification of assumptions, which the authors felt needed further elaboration (this phase was the third stage of the procedure). One of these issues was the concept of discipline. The questions posed were: What is the meaning of guidance and that of discipline? Which is their place in everyday practice? In which way can they prove to be useful or harmful?

After that, works of art were chosen that had the potential to be used as an incentive for our subject. At the first workshop, an excerpt by Kazantzakis was given [Kazantzakis, N. 1961 "A bird in the schoolyard"]. This was the fifth stage of the method. This excerpt was chosen because of the issue it addresses, that is the role and the attitude of the teacher in class, as well as the efficiency of his teaching method. It also seemed appropriate because of the strong words used, the vivid images and the figuration of the descriptions, elements that provoke the emotional appeal of the reader. Through the procedure of analyzing the text, working in groups and role playing, the learners realized the causes of the emotional load of the characters and the factors affecting them. At the end of the workshop, a connection was made between the subject and the questions initially posed.

At the next workshop, the word "discipline" was given to the groups. They were asked to write the meaning that word had in education. A discussion followed, as well as comments on the findings. After that, they were given the painting "School of Athens" by Raffaello [1511]. The specific painting was chosen because of its potential to give many incentives for the questioning of the teacher-student interaction, to cover learning needs at a personal level, to break free from a specific educational framework, as well as the development of reflection and critical thinking. The analysis of the painting was based on Perkins [1994] technique of gradual observation. Beginning with the main elements of the painting, we gradually went deeper into more complex situations related to the learning process. Afterwards we detected the elements that were relevant to the issue in question. A discourse followed concerning the concept of 'discipline' and how it is visualized in the painting. We returned to the initial answers and had a discussion based on the new elements that came up from analyzing the painting.

During the last workshop, we projected parts of the film "The Wave" [Dennis Gansel, "Die Welle" 2008]. This particular film was chosen as it discusses the issue of discipline in the educational field, as well as the relationship that develops between the teacher and the students. Initially there was a short introduction of the film, followed by three excerpts. In between excerpts, a discussion was held and learners commented on the film, until reaching the climax of the film, where there was a discussion on the impact of a learning process, on the role of the teacher, and on the attitudes and methods shown in the film.

Examining the theme of discipline, we can reach to the conclusion that the prevailing view of the students stated initially, was that the teacher must maintain discipline and obedience in the classroom. In the beginning of the project, the first concepts that were expressed after brainstorming were:

Discipline, Consistency, Restrictions, Punishment, Obedience, Order, Lack of Freedom.

Answers from a personal questionnaire quoted:

Maria: *"The teacher must be capable of maintaining the children's discipline."*

Joanna: *"It is imposed to the children by the teachers, and it concerns the reinforcement of limits, in favor of the children's proper behavior."*

Vasso: *"Obedience to the functional rules of education. The means to accomplish that is punishment."*



After the application of the project, their views on the subject had changed remarkably. Their perception of discipline now, was about focusing on a target, as an internal need of the student. It is not imposed externally by the teacher.

Maria: "... Discipline is not connected to fear, but to an internal need of the child to obey the rules and reach his or her goals."

Joanna: "It might not be obvious at first, but it does exist... It is the result of the commitment one shows to their work".

Vasso: "Internal discipline is very important. It is more substantial when it derives from the individuals' personal discipline".

Conclusions

From the answers given by learners participating in the application of this teaching method, as well as from the different subjects that were discussed during the process, we noted several alterations in their initial assumptions. Through the process of analyzing artworks, in combination with their own relevant experiences that were withdrawn from their memories, participants felt like they were actually "living" the situations under question. The procedure had a strong impact on their assumptions.

The evaluation of the method applied showed that it does facilitate the achievement of educational goals. The method itself is a good paradigm of alternative teaching methods, enriching the variety of pedagogical practices that can be applied. Also, the utility of art in education and the educational role of the aesthetic experience are highlighted. Finally, the research showed that it is important for student teachers to be familiarized with the use of art as an educational tool, in order to be able to use it in the future as teachers.

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