Impetus, imagination and shared experience in aesthetic communication

Abstract

Our presentation will take an ongoing philosophical work of aesthetic communication as a starting point (Ferm & Thorgersen, 2007). The last couple of years we have been combining the philosophies of life-world-phenomenology and pragmatist aesthetics to develop a theory on the dynamic processes of aesthetic communication in learning environments. The main philosophers in this work have been, Dewey, Shusterman, and Merleau-Ponty. In both pragmatism and phenomenology there is room for analysing social dynamics as well as subject's meaning-making, but where the phenomenologist often prefer to take the subject's bodily position as a point of departure, the pragmatist often take social change in relation to individual growth as a starting point. We have had a special focus on awareness as a tool for illuminating the complex phenomenon. The dimensions that have been revealed are: Awareness of oneself, awareness of others, awareness of means of expression and awareness of role and responsibility in communication. We have also tried to develop the relation between philosophy and practice (Thorgersen, 2007, Ferm, 2007, Ferm, 2008). The developing thoughts that we want to present and discuss in our presentation concerns the shared nature of experience in the processes of aesthetic communication. Experience seen as shared, opens up for ways of regarding aesthetic communication in education where expression of oneself, roles in communication, means of expression and others are significant factors. We want to examine how dimensions of impetus and imagination work in the developing processes from recollected experience to future experience, in other words situations where aesthetic experiences are shared and developed. We will go further into the earlier mentioned philosophers’ writings about these specific aspects of aesthetic communication and develop the philosophy connected to aesthetic communication in educational settings.
Introduction

Our presentation will take an ongoing philosophical work of aesthetic communication as a starting point (Ferm & Thorgersen, 2007). The last couple of years we have been combining the philosophies of life-world phenomenology and pragmatist aesthetics to develop a theory on the dynamic processes of aesthetic communication in learning environments. The main philosophers in this work have been, Dewey, Shusterman, and Merleau-Ponty.

The following little story from a choir rehearsal exemplifies several aspects of what we will be presenting, and will serve as a referring example throughout the paper:

Recently I participated in a small vocal ensemble. A new constellation of six people, who had never met before, were about to practice together a few times, and then perform baroque music along with a rather established baroque orchestra in Stockholm. All of us were musically educated, with lots of experience from singing in choirs, but with very little experience of doing baroque music. The last days each of us had strove to learn our parts by reading the notes. At the first practice occasion one of the musicians from the orchestra, the cellist, was present. We sat in a circle together with the cellist who was set to lead the repetition and started with one of the pieces. After just a couple of bars he stopped the music and said. "Is it ok if I say something about baroque music already now? The important things are rhythm, dynamics, and diction. If we concentrate on doing this together, the timbre will be much better as well. Make the ending notes short, and make room for others. Listen to each other, and to me. Maybe I build upon something that you do, and vice versa.” He really loved to play (in a double sense) this kind of music, and he played with us.”Let's take just the four bars to get the right feeling.” Sometimes the cellist jumped up with the cello in his hand and yelled: "Did you feel it? There it is, you did it together now!" During the practice occasion he also stressed that perfect pitch, or note was less important: What was important was to take initiative, to dare, and to do it together. It was important to be there, to be present, to listen, to do and feel the music, to learn and feel the baroque genre, to use our musical knowledge and experience in a new setting, and to come close to our common experience of ”when it worked”. I could have been staying there for ever.

Experience seen as shared, opens up for ways of regarding aesthetic communication in education where expression of oneself, roles in communication, means of expression and others are significant factors. Education is a communicative activity where learning is supposed to happen as individual and societal change towards certain goals. The goals can be set on personal, interpersonal and societal levels and can be more or less explicitly defined. It is in communication the world becomes meaningful and the individual defines herself in relation to others - learning is about making sense of the word as it is experienced. As Dewey (1916) recognized, communication is about transforming individual experience into shared experience. All kinds of communication take place through a multitude of different modes of expressions such as body language, sounds, art, oral verbal language, printed language, clothing or multimedia. However, as seen in previous studies (e.g. Marner, 2005; Thorgersen, 2007), schools tend to stress the importance of the verbal aspects of communication through all parts of education, while other aspects of communication are referred to particular subjects or neglected all together.

By discussing the concept aesthetic communication we attempt to develop and acquire understanding of the complex phenomenon of communication in relation to learning. Entering from the combined perspectives of life world phenomenology and Deweyan pragmatism, a philosophical view of aesthetic communication is gradually being built.

By combining pragmatism and phenomenology, aesthetic communication can be understood more diversely. In both pragmatism and phenomenology there is room for analyzing social dynamics as well as subject's meaning-making, but where the phenomenologist often prefer to take the subject's bodily position as point of
departure, the pragmatist often take the social change in relation to individual growth as a starting point. The philosophical points of departure are therefore complementary and in most respects compatible.

In the pragmatist tradition of Dewey, aesthetics is seen as a complex phenomenon that gets its meaning in a social context and is indissolubly connected to aesthetics experiences which in turn is seen as a fundamental necessity for human beings. Aesthetics is therefore seen as relational since the potential for aesthetic experiences changes according to what society, what time and what placement an expression is experienced in. In a pragmatist sense, aesthetics is not only relational; it is also deeply rooted in the body (Shusterman, 2002). As communicative beings we interact with the total self. Aesthetic experience is therefore constituted by a combination of the relational, the communicative and the personal, through the body as the experiencing and communicative centre. According to Dewey experience is shared and common. The notion of aesthetic communication presented in this paper provides a framework which can be helpful in order to understand the possible multidimensional functions of the arts in education.

The main purpose of this workshop is to discuss how the concepts impetus and imagination can function to develop our view of aesthetic communication.

**Shared experience, impetus and imagination**

The figure aims to describe how dimensions of impetus and imagination work in the developing processes from previous experience to future experience in situations where aesthetic experiences are being shared and developed. The arrow represents process in time, while the circle represents a flux and dynamic where different aspects of aesthetic communication operates simultaneously and in various constellations. Imagination and impetus are put into the figure in order to test if they can deepen our understanding of aesthetic communication.
The introductory example shows how individual experience was shared and developed in a shared experience, which in turn became new individual as well as shared experience (and growth) for all involved parties. An interesting aspect to discuss, is what gives energy to this process.

**Impetus**

In Wordnet dictionary, “impetus” is described as “a force that moves something along”.

Impetus seen from a life world phenomenological perspective involves the ideas of *intentional arc* and the *maximum grip*. The intentional arc concerns human beings' close connections to the world where meaning is constituted through more and more refined perceptions of the current situations. Maximum grip refers to the body's tendency to respond to the world in such a way that brings the current situation to the sense of an optimal gestalt. In other words, the maximum grip enables the body to develop an ongoing equilibrium with the environment and achieve an optimal body-environment relationship. Impetus in this regard refers to a desire to get the maximum grip of each situation and every new setting.

The impetus in the baroque setting in the introduction was developed within the communication. The collective actions, the common aesthetic experience, constituted of aesthetic values and expressions, the bodies’ interplay, the sense of the maximum grip, made making music develop in a specific but not predetermined direction.

The described process of aesthetic communication can also be seen as reflection. According to Dewey (1916), reflection provides a bridge between perplexity and settledness. Perplexity arise when an experience makes little or no sense and when there is a need to make sense of the situation. Impetus arise from this frustration (Rodgers, 2002). Dewey (1958, 2005) sees reflection, as experience, as being social as well as personal, and therefore that reflection takes place in communication.

However, not all experiences lead to growth. A person may experience something which makes her develop unrewarding and unwanted habits, actions, skills, knowledge, emotions or behavior. Dewey calls this “mis-educative” experiences. (Dewey, 1998) To be able to grow in a wanted way, imagination is necessary.

**Imagination**

When human beings experience the world through perception, earlier experience influence what is seen, heard, smelled, or felt. “The appearance of an object requires more than simply the presence of a set of sense
qualities, for it evokes the illusive presence of a background of sensation that is as much absent as present and as much visible as invisible” (Steves 2001 p. 337). Imagination is used to fulfill expressions, to make the invisible, or unsaid, become visible or heard. Human beings come up with new ideas by combining earlier experiences. “Imagination is thus at the heart of perception and is closely tied to the incarnate body.” (Joy & Sherry, 2003, p. 264) or in the words of Dewey: “...an imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world.” (Dewey 2005 p. 279)

This demands active subjects. “The meaning of a gaze is only decided by the whole fleshy world it occurs in – by the indeterminable lights and contexts, the myriad of invisible influences, motives, and intentions, the varied interpretations of facial expressions of this wide ‘wild' world” (Adams 2001, p 209). In a communicative setting, the individuals co-experience common expressions in different ways, depending on their earlier experiences. The possibilities for common imaginations are uncountable, depending on the various experiences of the participants. Culture, genre, and historical context, together with the level of trust and mutual respect between the individuals, allow or hinder those imaginations.

Imagination materializes in expressions and develops in communication. Dewey points to art as particularly well suited to materialize imagination “Possibilities are embodied in works of art that are not elsewhere actualized; this embodiment is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination.” (Dewey 2005 p. 279) This further stresses the importance of facilitating aesthetic communication in order to grow as human beings.

The example in the introduction shows how the participants’ imaginations of musical parameters such as dynamics, rhythm and togetherness create a common picture of baroque music. The imagination demands the participants to be active and dare to take initiative, take and give space and to be in the music. Imagination is as such closely interrelated with impetus since imagination is necessary to set the goals for any learning process and for educative rather than mis-educative experiences to happen. Impetus and imagination draw on each other in any learning process in order for the individual and the common to define constantly changing ideals for an imagined future, presence and past.

**Points for further discussion**

Maybe an aesthetic communication setting can be seen as a phenomenological body where the participants are inter-related and work together like different organs with complimentary skills and actions where all actions involve every participant (Stubley, 1998). “The body” is closely connected to the world through the life-worlds of the participants, their experiences and expectations. The boundaries of the body are changing depending on the directedness of “the body”. When the vocal ensemble were to sing together with the orchestra, the boundaries of “the body” had to include both groups of living subjects. New common goals and imaginations had to be settled and new perceptions of the maximum grip had to be established. Later when also the audience were included in the “body”, the process evolved and the impetus and imagination changed.

Our intention with this paper has been to start a discussion about how the concepts of impetus and imagination could be useful as complements in a theory of aesthetic communication, based on the thinking of Merleau-Ponty and Dewey. The concepts were used to shed light on the developmental dimensions of aesthetic communication, such as growth and learning. We believe that the demands for an active subject in the phase of imagination is really interesting, as well as the weight of the “body’s” inner motivation, in contrast to outer, future goals of artistic development.


