

Teaching with and for Aesthetic Experience: Baking Buns for Mrs. Blinks

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Abstract

John Dewey's theorizing describes aesthetic experience as the apotheosis of experience (1934/1980). In this article the author explores how teachers can leverage aesthetic experience to enhance student learning. The exploration begins with a definitional discussion of the term "aesthetics" and a brief overview of the literature that addresses aesthetic experience as a vehicle for learning. Three stories of learning and teaching are then presented and analyzed through the lens of Dewey's theorizing of experience, with key elements of aesthetic experience identified and discussed: continuity, interaction, wholeness, resonance, allowing new ways of perceiving, enabling deep understanding, involving making, and enriching life. The third story is aesthetically presented and analyzed through an arts-informed research method: musically enhanced narrative inquiry. The article concludes with a discussion of the role of the teacher in supporting learning through aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Aesthetic experience; Experiential education; John Dewey; Curriculum theory; Musically enhanced narrative inquiry

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"Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results" (John Dewey, 1916, p. 191).

John Dewey's views on experiential education have resonated powerfully amongst educators for over a century. While the value of learning through experience is not in doubt, it behooves educationists to examine what *kinds* of experiences most effectively promote learning. Dewey's theorizing describes aesthetic experience as the apotheosis of experience (1934/1980). Deweyan scholars Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock (2005) accordingly infer that aesthetic experiences have the most educative potential. My aim with this article is to explore how teachers can leverage aesthetic experience to enhance student learning. To support this exploration I present a definitional discussion of the term "aesthetics," followed by a brief overview of the literature that addresses aesthetic experience as a vehicle for learning. I then share three empirical accounts of teaching and learning, and analyze them through the lens of Dewey's theorizing of experience, as presented in *Experience and Education* (1938/1997) and in *Art as Experience* (1934/1980).

Defining Aesthetics

Making use of the term “aesthetics” can be problematic due to the elusiveness of any precise definition (Schonmann, 2019). Aesthetics is often associated with the concept of beauty (an aesthetician works to enhance one’s physical beauty), but also with the arts (as in the philosophical contemplation of art in late eighteenth century Enlightenment in England and Germany, and the notion that aesthetic experience results from the contemplation of art). While education philosopher Maxine Greene has defined aesthetics as (2007) “the study of the arts” (p. 1), she has also defined aesthetics more broadly, as “concerned about perception, sensation, imagination, and how they relate to knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world” (2001, p. 5).

Etymologically, the term aesthetic derives from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, meaning of or for perception of the senses. Smithrim and Upitis (2002) suggest it is helpful to think of the term as opposite to “anaesthetic,” denoting the absence of sensation, or feeling; aesthetic, then, indicates a full or heightened sensory experience. In the book *Homo Aestheticus* (1995), anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake identifies the essential role of the aesthetic in human evolution, theorizing that the core of artistic activity is “making special,” and that humans participate in making special - a biologically endowed need - in order to engage the feelings of self and others in profound ways, thus activating and heightening attention to serious concerns often associated with survival. Synthesizing these conceptions, I find it helpful to think of an aesthetic experience as a “feelingful” response to sensory stimulation. While an aesthetic response may be provoked through interaction with art, it may also be provoked by other stimuli. What is key, is that the stimuli engage feelings in profound ways.

Aesthetic Experience as a Vehicle for Learning

Abbs (1994) conceptualized the aesthetic as a mode of intelligence activated in response to sensory experience, evident when children use their senses to explore and develop understanding of the world around them. Building on the writings of Abbs (1994) and O’Toole (2012), Elizabeth Anderson (2016) suggested the field of aesthetics is a place where art and play come together, as children engage in “exploratory learning through senses” (2016, p. 6).

According to Maxine Green (2001), aesthetic experiences enable learning by cultivating the skills of noticing (being “wide awake”), connecting to personal experiences, and envisioning new possibilities. Elaborating on these notions, Kathleen Gallagher (2005), writing from a drama education perspective, argued that aesthetic learning can provoke imagination that can in turn lead to a shift in understanding. Extending the idea further, Bundy (2005), Eisner (2008), and Riddett-Moore (2009) wrote that aesthetic experience can promote empathy and compassion that can in turn provoke action. Ross Anderson (2018), referencing affective neuroscience literature (Damasio, 2010; Delafield & Adie, 2016; Immordino-Yang & Yang, 2017; Osgood-Campbell, 2015), theorized that aesthetic learning experiences, due to their activation of multisensory systems and engagement of emotions, have the potential to enhance neural bindings that

“strengthen the relation of meanings, values, and purposiveness of actions and thoughts” (p. 73).

While often associated with the arts, Sinclair (2012) identified that many educationalists see aesthetic engagement and aesthetic knowing as significant and powerful across learning disciplines. For example, Ross Anderson (2018) described the value of science learners using the drama education technique of *tableaux vivants* “to express the sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes that signify a concept or an idea” (p. 73). (He provided the example of middle school students using their bodies and gestures to illustrate the process of evaporation caused by heat energy.) Farris and Sengupta (2016) have argued that applying principles of aesthetic experiences can support democratic and inclusive pedagogy for computing and science education. In a secondary English literature context, Hinchion (2016) identified that learners’ understanding can be enhanced through aesthetic interaction with texts, supporting students in not just conceptual knowing, but “perceptual knowing through the senses” (p. 195). Klein (2018) found that aesthetic experience can lead to transformative learning through immersion in and reflection on everyday landscapes.

Much of the literature addressing the potential for aesthetic experience to support learning can be traced back directly to John Dewey. In *Art as Experience* (1934/1980) Dewey addressed aesthetic experience as the pinnacle of human experience. He insisted, “To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is” (1934/1980, p. 278). Dewey differentiated between “an” experience, which is rich, and an “aesthetic” experience, which is richer. He characterized “an” experience as having parts integrated into a meaningful whole, having closure and fulfillment, and ultimately enabling new ways of perceiving. He described aesthetic experience as having all those elements and more: it involves “living in the experience of making and perceiving” (1934/1980, p. 33), activates emotion as the “moving and cementing” force (1934/1980, p. 49), and contributes meaning and value to future experience, “thus leaving us and the world itself irrevocably changed” (paraphrased by Jackson, 1998, p. 33).

In their book *John Dewey and the Art of Teaching: Toward Reflective and Imaginative Practice* (2005), Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock unpack Dewey’s writings in relation to teaching and learning. In one chapter they offer the metaphor of teacher as composer to suggest how teachers can artistically “compose” educative experiences. They explain, “The solution...[is] to make our teaching and students’ learning more like art, more of an artistic, aesthetic, experience. The more we compose such experiences, the more influential teaching and learning are” (p. 137). The authors lay out a continuum of learning experiences, from those that offer the least to most educative potential (please see table 1). At the beginning of the continuum is an “anesthetic experience,” that results in a complete absence of learner engagement. A “non-aesthetic experience” is slightly better, as it inspires some “cognitive doodling” but lacks any meaningful connection to learners’ worlds. At the next level, “experience,” the learning has some connections to learners’ lives, but no relevant goals and the learning is fragmented. “An’ experience” represents a further advance along the continuum, and features continuity and interaction (more on these concepts later), wholeness, resonance, and allows new ways of perceiving. At the end of

the continuum is an “aesthetic experience,” that includes all the elements of “an” experience but also involves making, enables deep understanding, and ultimately enriches life (Simpson et al., 2005, pp. 132-137).

Table 2. *Continuum of Learning Experiences*

Anesthetic Experience	Non-Aesthetic Experience	Experience	“An” Experience	Aesthetic Experience
-complete absence of learner engagement	-cognitive doodling” -lacks any meaningful connection to learners’ worlds	-some connections to learners’ lives -no relevant goals -learning is fragmented	-continuity -interaction -wholeness -resonance -allows new ways of perceiving	-continuity -interaction -wholeness -resonance -allows new ways of perceiving -involves making -enables deep understanding -enriches life

Adapted from Simpson et al., 2005, pp. 132-7.

Stories of Experience

To explore and illustrate the upper end of Simpson and colleagues’ (2005) continuum of learning experiences, I offer three stories of teaching and learning. As a guiding metaphor for considering the significance and value of the experiences described - and how teachers can shape and enhance them - I propose that powerful learning experiences make a splash in learners’ lives. The splash in the pond causes ripples that radiate outwards, signaling and provoking change. In analyzing these stories, I strive to identify how a teacher can bring such an experience to a learner, and instigate the ripples: teacher as pebble dropper.

Fateful Words

In an interview about his rise to fame and fortune BlackBerry co-founder and CEO Mike Lazaridis recalled his high school electronics teacher offering him a prophecy: “Someday the person who puts wireless and computers together is really going to make something” (cited in Anderssen, 2002). These words made clear Mike Lazaridis’s destiny; he went on to combine wireless and computer technology in the BlackBerry, a paradigm-shifting handheld device that launched the smart phone era. Mr. Micsinszki, the electronics teacher, propelled his student into a life of groundbreaking work in the field of telecommunications.

How can a teacher enable learning experiences that impact? How to recognize the right moment to drop the pebble? What kind of pebble to drop? To be educative, Dewey maintains an experience must satisfy the principles of *interaction* and *continuity*.

In discussing interaction, Dewey explained that an experience “is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (1938/1997, p. 41). Dewey identified as significant the internal factors of the individual, such as attitudes, beliefs, habits, prior knowledge, and emotions, and the “objective” influences of the school

environment, including (1) the mental attitudes and habits of the persons (e.g., teachers and peers) with whom the student is in contact; (2) the subjects studied; and (3) contemporary educational aims and ideals.

At a more nuanced level, Dewey maintained that an educative experience must not only engender meaningful interaction between the (school) environment and the learner, but also between the learner and *self*, in that learners must be ready, willing and able to engage with the material and learn from it: “The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material” (1938/1997, p. 27). The teacher’s role, thus, is to ensure the material is appropriate for the learner, *and* to ensure the learner is ready for it. Mr. Micsinszki, the electronics teacher, supported Lazaridis’ readiness for learning by allowing him to develop skills and experience working in the school lab during the summer months, and inserting him into the milieu of electronics enthusiasts by taking him along to ham-radio meets to pick up cheap parts. I do not know but imagine the fateful words arose during a conversation as the two tinkered together, or pored over parts. I imagine that as Lazaridis interacted with his environment in this way he became open to the deep learning potential embedded within Mr. Micsinszki’s message. Lazaridis caught hold of the fateful words because he was ready to hear them; they resonated with what he knew about the world and his role within it.

Of continuity, Dewey wrote: “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (1938/1997, p. 19). Lazaridis perceived the words of his teacher as a logical extension to his tinkering with electronics. The possibility those words presented shaped his future.

I reckon Mike Lazaridis’ experience constitutes what Dewey calls “*an experience*,” in which “the parts are brought together into a meaningful and rewarding whole that allows new ways of perceiving” (1934/1980, p. 42). The experience had continuity, interaction, wholeness, resonance, and provided Lazaridis with a new and exciting vision of the future of electronics. But the experience was not *aesthetic*. And for Dewey it is the aesthetic experiences - those that make you feel - that are the most powerful.

Blood-Squirting Eyes

Some days ago my eldest son came home from school and told us that horned lizards can squirt blood from their eyes. Max’s first encounter with research! Mrs. Thomson helped him choose a topic, then sent him to the computers to find what he could find. Brimming with agency and ownership in this (relatively) self-instigated inquiry, he zealously unearthed the fascinating factoid. I’m certain the experience will stick with him, thanks to its aesthetic dimensions. Blood-squirting eyes are just the thing to elicit a feelingful response from a 7-year-old. The pebble had dropped into the water with a resounding splash!

But for Dewey it is not just the activation of emotion that renders an experience aesthetic; it must have wholeness, completeness, consummation. Emotional engagement must serve to bring all the disparate elements together into a meaningful whole. Dewey refers to emotion as the “moving and cementing”

(1934/1980, p. 49) force that guides the “selecting and assembling” (1934/1980, p. 74) of elements into an aesthetic experience. The emotions cannot be tangentially evoked; they must belong to the experience and support its meaning. Dewey discusses an experience as requiring both freedom and constraint—it must be freed from the tyranny of the mundane, yet carefully constrained to only those elements that inherently belong:

The enemies of the esthetic are...the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of experience. (1934/1980, p. 47)

Max’s experience was certainly not humdrum. The freedom he was allowed enabled him to make the intriguing find. But did the discovery of the lizard’s blood-squirting powers connect to a greater unity and coherence of learning experience? It did not. In truth, Max’s lingering on this juicy piece of knowledge might even be considered (uncharitably, perhaps, but nevertheless) an aimless indulgence; the learning was not reined in to fit within a greater unity. Had Max gone on to author the adventures of a comic-book superhero with blood-squirting eyes the experience would *then* have included the elements of interaction, continuity, making, unity of experience and all the rest. But the experience did not propel him there; while the pebble caused an impressive splash, the ripples did not amount to much.

To bring to learners all the elements of an aesthetic experience is a mission of considerable complexity. How can a teacher marshal all the pieces in place and arrange them in just such a way that a diverse group of learners can together have an aesthetic experience? In the classroom crucible, I believe such experiences are as often stumbled upon as planned - serendipitous, emergent, lucky accidents that have much to do with teacher instinct.

Baking Buns for Mrs. Blinks

In order to present the third story of teaching and learning with maximum impact, I have chosen to present it with some aesthetic enhancement.

For the past few years I have been researching with an arts-informed method that I call “Musically Enhanced Narrative Inquiry” (Bolden, 2017). The method has a basis in narrative inquiry, in that it is used to explore the knowledge of teaching that teachers hold, embedded within the stories they tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The method also draws from arts-informed inquiry, which recognizes that employing the arts in research processes allows for researching “in ways that more fully acknowledge the richness and complexity of human experience” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 32). As Barone and Eisner (2012, p. 1) have suggested, artistic processes and products may be able to illuminate and communicate meanings in ways that traditional research cannot - to “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable.” In carrying out this work I used musical processes in the analysis phase, as I explored meanings within the data, and also to artistically represent and illuminate what I discovered.

Data collection and analysis

In the summer of 2014 I held and recorded a series of conversations with experienced schoolteachers. Betty (her name is used here with permission) began teaching in 1956 and retired in 1984. Over the course of her expansive career Betty taught in two small village schools in the south of England. She taught students aged 4-7 years.

My analysis of the data gathered through recorded conversations with Betty involved listening to the recordings and reading through the interview transcripts multiple times, in order to identify rich stories that were representative of the knowledge of teaching that Betty had accumulated. Betty shared the particular story that I reproduce here when I asked her about the teaching moments she remembered most fondly:

I always mucked about doing silly things, you know? Whatever I wanted to do. We made cakes in school, and took them up, these buns, to that dear old lady that lived almost next door to the school. Can't think what her name was now... Mrs. Blinks. Yes! She was one of these poor old ladies that sort of walked like this - with a humped back, you know? And she lived just nearby. So we made these cakes, and how I worked that into a lesson - don't ask me! But we had the flour, the weights and everything, and my room had a little room next to it, with a cooker and everything, and so I was able to bake these things. We made them - baked these buns, and I said: 'Right, we're going to take them round to Mrs. Blinks!' Which was only just next door. So we went in to Mrs. Blinks and took her buns to her.

I began my analysis of this story by employing the narrative inquiry data analysis processes of restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), as illustrated above. This process involved removing extraneous and repeated words, re-ordering sentences for chronological coherence, and so on, in order to produce a clear and compelling recounting of the pertinent events. I then further analyzed the data using musical processes, as an arts-informed "methodological enhancement" (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 33).

The musically enhanced processes began with the construction of an audio re-telling of the story in the participant's voice, making use of professional digital audio editing software to organize and combine various excerpts of the recorded interviews into one spoken narrative. Next, working within the digital audio context, I sought and musically highlighted (coded) key phrases that represented larger, significant themes within and across the data (please see Table 2). I superimposed a clarinet motif within the audio file to highlight Betty's words, "whatever I wanted to do," to code the phrase as a signifier of teacher as curriculum maker - Betty as a "composer of experiences." I used a recorder motif to code the words, "we made cakes in school," signifying the theme of a curriculum of delight. Making is prominent within the theme, and so it aligns with Dewey's conception of an aesthetic experience as "inherently connected with the experience of making" (1934/1980, p. 48). The words "*one of these poor old ladies*" I coded with a guitar motif, to represent the theme of nurturing compassion. The theme connects to Dewey's notion of emotion as the "moving and cementing" (1934/1980, p. 49) force of aesthetic experience. I coded the phrase, "*how I worked that into a lesson - don't, don't ask me*" with a plucked string bass motif, representing the theme of teacher instinct, as Betty seamlessly integrated the prescribed curriculum of weights and measures within her own curriculum of baking buns. This theme connects to Dewey's conviction that an

aesthetic experience must have constituent parts that “come together in a meaningful whole” (1934/1980, p. 42), working together in a “unity of experience” (1934/1980, p. 47). The words “*round to Mrs. Blinks!*” I coded with the musical motif of a clarinet swooping upwards in pitch, signifying the theme of authentic purpose as represented by bun delivery, and connecting to Dewey’s insistence that an aesthetic experience must have “closure and fulfillment” (1934/1980, p. 42). Finally, I coded the words “*he became a baker afterwards*” with silence - that is, by letting Betty’s words sound on their own, and emphasizing them with an absence of musical highlighting. This phrase represents the theme of learning experiences that ripple outward and shape lives, and refers to Dewey’s concept of continuity, in that a meaningful experience connects to a learner’s past and future, and ideally “allows new ways of perceiving” (1934/1980, p. 42).

Table 2. Musical Coding of Themes

Participant words	Musical Coding	Theme	Connection to Aesthetic Experience
“ <i>whatever I wanted to do</i> ”	clarinet	teacher as curriculum maker	composing experiences
“ <i>we made cakes in school</i> ”	recorder	a curriculum of delight	making
“ <i>one of these poor old ladies</i> ”	guitar	nurturing compassion	emotion
“ <i>how I worked that into a lesson - don’t, don’t ask me</i> ”	plucked string bass	teacher instinct	integrating into a meaningful unity
“ <i>round to Mrs. Blinks!</i> ”	clarinet swooping up	authentic purpose	fulfillment, consummation
“ <i>he became a baker afterwards</i> ”	voice alone	learning experiences that ripple outward and shape lives	continuity & new ways of perceiving

Finally, I created an artistic musical piece to combine the data and analysis in a compelling representation. You may access the musically enhanced re-telling of the story (two minutes in duration) by following this link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/5gy56jhwkoawl8n/Baking%20Buns%20for%20Mrs.%20Blinks.mp3?dl=0>

The story of baking buns for Mrs. Blinks describes an experience with much that Dewey promotes: a departure from the norm; an experience that involves making and that is carefully contained, completed and consummated with the bun delivery; an emotional element in evoking the feeling of having done a good turn; engaging the senses with the warmth of the oven, the wafting aroma of fresh baking and doubtless a few surreptitious tastes... the experience seems to have it all. Suggesting the resonance of the experience and its potential for modifying experiences that came after (the ripple factor), one of the young learners even went on to become a baker!

Discussion

The three learning experiences I have described were all powerful, yet markedly different. In presenting and analyzing the stories I considered them

through the lens of Simpson et al.'s (2005) continuum of learning experiences, based on Dewey's conceptions of experience - that is, how the learners perceived the experiences. At this point, I will consider the experiences again, in terms of the facilitating role of the teacher.

In the book *Masterclass in Drama Education* (2012), Michael Anderson identified that a crucial teacher support for aesthetic learning is giving students the tools to fully engage in the experience in a way that is worthwhile and fulfilling. This notion harkens back to Dewey's emphasis on interaction, and his insistence that educators must ensure the material is suitable for the learner, *and* that the learner is ready for it. It was important that Betty taught the children how to do the measuring and mixing and greasing of the cooking tins so that they might engage fully, and also that she gave them a reason for baking the buns. With Max, it was important that Mrs. Thomson first helped him learn how to navigate an internet search engine and develop the note-taking skills to record what he had discovered, but also that she gave him the freedom to find and focus on information that resonated with *him*. With Mike Lazaridis, it was important that his electronics teacher gave him after-hours access to the school lab, and took him along to ham-radio meets, so that he might develop the skills and knowledge he would need to engage meaningfully in advanced electronics projects, and so have the capacity to envision what he might one day achieve.

In a 2016 article Elizabeth Anderson also identified key aspects of teacher support for aesthetic learning. She discussed, for example, the importance of selecting and shaping material to enhance (a) aesthetic effect - for example with contrasting elements (Heathcote, 1984) - and (b) significance, that is, authenticity and relevance for learners - a concept Barone has eloquently characterized as "a vital tension between the experiencer and the experienced" (1983, p. 22). In the story of Mike Lazaridis and the fateful words of his electronics teacher, the material was not shaped for aesthetic effect, but was shaped for significance, in that the words encapsulated an authentic problem within the field of electronics, and were relevant to the skills and knowledge and visions for the future that the young innovator was developing. The story of Max and the lizard featured aesthetic material that was not selected or shaped by the teacher, but rather that Max stumbled across himself, and certainly was no less powerful as a result. Within the material there was not, however, any particular significance or relevance to Max's world, and so the learning experience did not have great influence. The story of baking buns, however, involved material that was shaped for both aesthetic effect *and* significance. Aesthetic effect was assured through the elements of active making (baking) and all the sensory stimulation that was inevitably involved (feeling the flour run through the fingers, smelling the baking buns, and tasting them). The material was also significant to Betty's young learners; they were engaged in an authentic activity with a tangible and relevant outcome - delivering the buns to Mrs. Blinks.

Further, Elizabeth Anderson (2016) discussed the teacher role of "demystifying inner experience," referencing Fleming (1999), who advocated for teachers to help students articulate, discuss and thereby make meaning of their aesthetic experiences. Anderson also identified the related teacher support of "noticing" student responses in order to guide the aesthetic shaping of the experience, e.g., towards empathy and action. In the teaching stories I related,

the teachers did not overtly demystify inner experience or guide student responses - as far as I am aware - but there is every reason to believe that such facilitated reflection indeed could have enriched the learning of Mike Lazaridis, Max, and Betty's students. Focused teacher questioning and discussion could have helped the learners examine their personal inner responses to the various experiences, thereby helping them construct personal meaning, and perhaps even futures paths of action.

Final words

Teaching and learning involve all kinds of experiences. Simpson and colleagues (2005) suggest that the richer the experience, the greater the learning potential. They look to Dewey's writings to construct a continuum of experience, and suggest how educators can compose experiences - specifically, Deweyan *aesthetic* experiences - that "lead to growth, unlock pupil and world to each other and widen the scope of further experiences" (Hohr, 2012, p. 2). In this article I have described and analyzed three stories of learning and teaching to illustrate practical application of these theoretical concepts. I thereby offer, I hope, insight for teachers as to how they might compose educative experiences for their own learners.

I must admit, however, that in collecting, analyzing, and re-telling these stories of learning and teaching, it struck me that the teachers most likely did not compose and concoct these learning experiences for the purpose of activating aesthetic experience, but rather because the ideas made sense to them. They thought about their students and what would be meaningful for them, and designed learning experiences - with varying levels of intentional planning - accordingly. I think a great deal of teacher instinct was involved. Mike Lazaridis' electronics teacher, Mr. Micsinszki, likely did what he did and said what he said because it felt right within the context of supporting a keen and talented student. Max's teacher's instinct was to offer him some autonomy and access to the world wide web. And one day Betty came up with the idea of doing some baking with her young learners. I believe a teacher can instinctively sense that an experience has meaning and potential for resonance without knowing how or why. I suspect the art of teaching may not be about meticulously composing aesthetic learning experiences, but rather about developing and trusting instinct - tossing favourite pebbles into the pond, and hoping they will make ripples.

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