
Democracy & Education

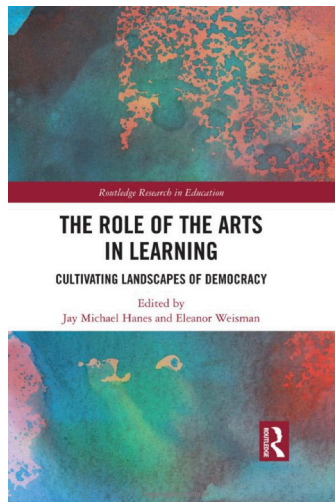
Supporting the Arts as Disciplines of Learning.

A Book Review of *The Role of the Arts in Learning: Cultivating Landscapes of Democracy*

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LEARNING THROUGH AND in partnership with the arts may contribute to an expansion of educative experiences beyond what can be measured through standardized assessment procedures, for example. The arts offer opportunities to gain experiences in *no right answer* environments—sites for inquiry learning, across discipline boundaries. In *The Role of the Arts in Learning: Cultivating Landscapes of Democracy*, editors Hanes and Weisman (2018) nurture a space for potential democratic learning inclusive of the arts. By harnessing the historical, pragmatic philosophes of John Dewey (1934) and Maxine Greene (1978), this book seeks to counter the political backdrop of neoliberal interference into educational systems. As an artist educator and researcher, I welcome the scholarship this book contributes toward expanding the dialogue around arts-inclusive learning. Within arts-based research and practice, the role of the arts in learning has long been a focal point supportive of Dewey and Greene philosophies. Their democratic ideals are revealed in arts-based literature as embracing social justice arts-inclusive curricula for educational settings. This collection of essays may then foster a wider conversation about arts-based learning as a contributing factor in promoting democratic educational opportunities.

Of the contributing authors in this collection, most practice in disciplines outside those affiliated within arts education or research scholarship. I am encouraged by the authors' views on how the arts facilitate landscapes of learning and believe these contributions enhance the dialogue toward transforming educative experiences.



The introductory chapter is where editors Hanes and Weisman outline the arts as a player within educational settings. They make a clear case of the challenges to Deweyan pragmatism and progressivism amid historical influences before describing how contemporary, neoliberal pressures impact education in context and in conflict with political interference from the left, right, and center.

Despite such influences, the collective voices in this book set an agenda of potentiality and possibility for democratic educational principles for learning. The authors within this text reflect certain voices alive within educational practice, research, and philosophizing today. These voices bear witness to colonization as a detrimental force within teaching and learning—a force driven by White, male-centric, dominating practices woven into the fabric of our social, educational systems. One general thematic element prevails: calling out White supremacy and privilege as drivers of knowledge access while striving to exemplify arts-based practices as learning vehicles promoting democratic access to knowledge. The arts are heralded as actionable components in critical instruction—agents of change toward inclusion, equity, and social justice learning embracing the *Democratic Vistas* Walt Whitman espoused (Hyatt,

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p. xi). Unanswered in these essays, however, are determinations for how such vistas should be roundly implemented and what the view of an arts-partnered democratic learning landscape would look like. The authors do offer examples of practice in specific instances and settings and all seemed to embrace Deweyan ideals underpinning pathways for implementing said democratic vistas.

Dewey's (1934) democratic theories, including impulsion, inhibition, and educative experiences, girded much of the writing about instructional pathways. His *mis-educative* experiences—those stunting growth and causing harm—were explicated by authors Bywater (Chapter 2), Prince and McCoy (Chapter 3), and Moore (Chapter 9), in critiques of White supremacy and privilege. Authors Moore and McDermott (Chapter 10) emphasize the importance of moving away from a position of failing to recognize privilege (McDermott, p. 152) by cultivating a “pedagogy of practice” (Moore, p. 138) inclusive of a critique of dominant privilege. Such practices, aimed at inclusion and equity for those voices at the margins, are what Moore calls disturbing the “heteropatriarchy” (p. 145), or those views stemming from Euro-centric, predominantly White, male theorizing still actively driving much educational thought and practice today. Recognizing White power privilege as a veneer of authority may uncover instances where Dewey's mis-educative experiences undergo critique to course-correct negative experiences toward generative, positively enhanced growth. Additionally, McDermott invokes the words of bell hooks when she wrote that along with recognizing White privilege, we should aim to “decolonize our minds” (p. 152). Using graffiti art as an example, McDermott stresses experiences that broaden awareness away from predominant, White-centered influences and toward those committed to democracy under a canopy of inclusive equity.

Moore's “pedagogies of practice” may even address neoliberal concerns impacting educational settings. A Deweyan approach to democratic learning might include apprenticeship as an impulsive force (Bywater) toward cooperative and evolutionary learning meant to promote active inquiry. This action may, in turn, propel agency toward countering neoliberal ideals of educational systems as just another commodity for capital consumption. Solymosi critiques neoliberal support of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) as a “myopic hypocrisy” (p.100) since funding for STEM programming eschews the arts and philosophy, negating potentialities for discipline-inclusive creative impacts on education.

Miller (Chapter 4) addresses democratic potentiality as an action challenging neoliberal assumptions through *impulsion*—a process of impulse and momentum (p. 58), or an energy for creative agency, historically championed by Dewey (1934), Neva Boyd (1971), and George Herbert Mead (1962). Both Bywater and Miller seem to draw attention toward the possible advantages the arts might contribute toward collective agency and active awareness as processes for important educational transformation. These transformative experiences call upon Deweyan reflection and, as authors Hollerman, Levine, Miller, and Solymosi write, there is a need to focus on reflexivity (seeing the self in action) as a “feed-forward and feedback” cycle (Hollerman, p.119; Solymosi, p. 91) of

action and doing, undoing, learning, and unlearning as supporting a restructuring of experiences—all aimed at transformative learning through the arts.

Viewing the arts as a vehicle for healing societal ills and injuries (Prince & McCoy), however, requires cautious consideration. Debates within art literature suggest that painting the arts as a cure-all may potentially set artistic practices colliding with inherent artistic intentions. Art has many potentialities. It may operate as social justice arts practice or socially engaged arts, but purposes and intentions for art-making and art-doing include other notions involving expression, challenge, discovery, and exploration—all of which may or may not have direct engagement with community, action, or healing. At issue is labeling and using a broad-brush term like “the arts” to define a specific practice within the arts. A more effective and deliberate approach might include the authors specifying the type of art being discussed—social justice art, for example—to enhance specificity while avoiding an overgeneralization of all artistic practices.

As well, the discussion by Solymosi (pp. 94–95) mischaracterizes arts teaching and artistic practice by inferring that art teachers allow students to create without guidance or instruction (by “osmosis,” p. 94) or that art is only concerned with an “expressive whole” (p. 94), lacking attention to creative processes. Art teachers may value creative expression, but few classroom teachers shun teaching technical skills or teaching about art in context. Little happenings in an art class are through osmosis. Also, artists often work to generate multiple parts of a compositional whole, reflecting on and revising work from concept to production. Like scientists, artists value process connected to product. Any romanticism of artists and arts-making, once de rigor by modernist standards and design, is now exposed within art literature and art educational practices as mythologizing and promoting a “heteropatriarchy” in creative activity.

Though the editors and authors in this collection provide a strong case for inclusive arts-based learning and actions in support of Dewey's (1934) philosophy of democratic educational practices, I might suggest this book as a fine companion for extending transdisciplinary conversations. Scholarship happening in *arts-based research*, in *a/r/tography*, and in *art as social practice* are already promoting social justice inquiry and creating vistas of democratic learning. Of note in this volume (Chapter 3 by Prince & McCoy) is a thoughtful examination of socially engaged art practice as a purposeful contributor toward building such dialogue. Voices that contribute so deeply to arts educational scholarship, those of Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone, Melody Milbrandt and Patricia Leavy, and Joni Boyd Acuff and Melanie L. Buffington, need to be included in the conversation as informed, contributing participants. A melding of all scholarship might produce both the desired ends of achieving democratic education through the arts and, ultimately, the compelling data for policymakers lacking an appreciation for such research—research offering generative and not generalizable results—as a counterargument to a neoliberal agenda.

Overall, this book presents ideas prime for critical contemplation in this era of a deprofessionalization of teachers,

coupled with neoliberal moves toward dismantling public education. In order to counter these attacks, educational scholars call for *disturbances* and *disruptions* to White, patriarchal frameworks undergirding educational practice. A worthy call continuously repeated with incremental evidentiary results. Perhaps a different prefix is in order—to initiate new change as a reminder that democracy still needs our attention. This collection of provocative essays may better serve to *re-rupt* and *re-turb*, or to burst and stir up the status quo as tools of agency, without apology

and with hope in supporting creative landscape vistas of democratic education.

References

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