Aesthetic Learning, Creativity and English Teaching

Abstract

My article argues that the concept of 'aesthetic learning' can be helpful for English teachers on two levels. First, it can be a useful identity for English teachers and students to adopt, based upon my own experiences as a secondary English teacher, creative writer and PhD student. Second, I argue that 'aesthetic learning' is an effective and productive way of analysing some of the learning processes that happen in the English teacher's classroom. In order to arrive at these conclusions, I examine my own creative writing, teaching and learning processes from which I extrapolate the notion that we are all 'aesthetic learners' in the sense that we learn to appreciate the qualities of the worlds we inhabit, whether these are actual or virtual. Throughout, my own writing, learning and teaching are used to illustrate my argument. In particular, the article seeks to re-position my own teaching in secondary schools within the context of 'aesthetic learning'.

Key words: aesthetic learning, creative teaching, Shakespeare, William Blake, meta-cognition

Introduction

In early 2010, I made an announcement to my Year 7 English class at the secondary school where I was teaching which startled some students: 'I want to make a confession to you all, I'm not really a teacher. I'm actually a learner, just like

you. And the thing I'm really interested in learning about is the thoughts and feelings that the world and words have on me; whether something is beautiful or not, the study of which is called 'aesthetics'. This makes me an 'aesthetic learner' and I want show that you are too…'

With that I produced a sweet from my pocket, a brightly-coloured sugary square called a Rhubarb and Custard Chew, and explained that I hadn't eaten one in over thirty years. I said: 'But I want to eat it in front of you and describe the sensations, the feelings, the memories, the associations that it creates.' I did so, and described how I felt transported back to my childhood when I ran to the sweetshop with my brother on Saturday mornings in the 1970s to buy sweeties in a bag for 5p. I began to write down my thoughts on the board.

'I'm learning about those days again as I eat this sweet,' I said. 'This is what makes me an aesthetic learner. Now I want you for homework to find the sweets you liked from when you were little and bring them into school to eat, and we will see what memories they trigger' (Gilbert, 2015).

The next lesson was joyful: my 11-year-old students ate their sweets, shared their memories of consuming them when they were little, and then wrote descriptions. Some penned sensory images with the sounds, sights and smells of sweet shops, kitchens and cafes featuring heavily, while others devised longer narratives about siblings squabbling over sweets, parental concerns about teeth and health, and memories of trips to cinemas, sports centres and parks. For the first time, I felt I was truly learning about my students: their desires, their treasured memories, their familial relationships.

The Identity of the English Teacher

The way I framed my 'sweet' exercise felt risky to me (Gilbert, 2015). In recent years, the identity of English teachers has become problematic (Marshall, 2000): therefore, casting myself as a 'learner' (Watkins, 2010) was a leap in the dark. In 2013, the then education secretary Michael Gove singled out English teachers and accused them of using 'teaching methods which have nothing to do with passing on knowledge' and putting 'their own learning aside so that work is 'relevant' to the students' (2013). This conceptualisation simultaneously indicts teachers for failing to do their duty to 'pass on knowledge' and yet portrays them as victims of a system where their own 'learning' is marginalised: they are both perpetrator and victim. In her book *English Teachers – The Unofficial Guide* (2000), Bethan Marshall outlines what she perceives as their five main identities, based on a series of interviews she conducted: Old Grammarians, Pragmatists, Liberals, Technicians and Critical Dissenters. Marshall's research indicates that only the Critical Dissenters consistently rebel against the prevailing hegemony. They are 'self-confessed radicals who apply this to a theory of culture and also learning, which necessitates mixed ability teaching' (p. 121); they put learning at the heart of who they are both as teachers and as a people: they attend conferences, book groups etc. outside school hours and view English teaching as a form of 'praxis', perceiving the inventiveness of everyday life and ways in which this 'natural' creativity might be brought into the classroom (p. 121).

Like many English teachers, I've adopted all of the identities Marshall outlines at some point in my twenty-five-year career: I've taught grammatical terminology in a way that would have made the Old Grammarian proud (pp. 73-76); I've been very

strategic in teaching to the test like a Pragmatist (pp. 82-84); I've promoted the Great Tradition view of literature, singing the praises of the literary canon, like a Liberal (p. 91); and I've familiarised myself with all the latest jargon to do with levels and learning objectives like a Technician (pp. 96-99); and, in the latest decade, I've definitely increasingly become a Critical Dissenter. Perhaps this is because the idea of being 'creative' – which is a central component of critical dissent as Marshall frames it -- which initially attracted me to the profession and continues to do so.

David Stevens, while arguing that 'creativity…needs a place from which it will thrive' (2004, p. 32) points out it is 'not without its tensions and difficulties' (p. 33). Part of Gove's outrage at perceived 'creative' approaches to English teaching has been generated because of their very success. Educational thinkers such as Howard Gardner (1983), Ken Robinson (2011), and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (1997) have all advocated creative pedagogies in their different ways, which have had a significant influence in the last decade (Goodman, 2010). I've attended a number of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) days where teachers have watched their motivational videos and discussed their research. While most English teachers do not share Michael Gove's contempt for some of the strategies they suggest, there has been a healthy dose of scepticism regarding some of their claims, such as Robinson's that 'schools kill creativity' (Robinson, 2006). Part of the problem here is that Robinson's ideas are framed within 'neo-liberal' conceptions of education, with creativity being consistently presented as a means to the end of economic success (Robinson, 2011, p. 210).

But as Simon Gibbons has shown in his history of the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) there is a rich tradition in English education of creative teaching which is not framed by such commercial orthodoxies (2013). Gibbons

argues that there emerged, in post-war Britain, a counter-cultural 'creative' movement in which English teachers such as Harold Rosen and John Dixon framed creative approaches to teaching English by 'bringing a social and political activism to their work in education' (p. 40). However, this has changed:

New teachers, many of whom enter the profession with deeply held beliefs about the transformative power of English, seem seldom to be encouraged to pursue their visions, to take risks or to think radically, for fear of falling foul of the system. (Gibbons, 2016, p. 36)

This is the context in which Robinson, Dweck and Gardner's ideas have been adopted; they operate more like educational 'gurus' cleverly positioning themselves against prevailing government hegemonies. This argument draws sympathy from teachers, but yet never really questions the social fabric that has produced the inequalities we see in society today (Vassallo S., Cirker M., 2016, p. 16).

Both Gibbons and Marshall perceive critical dissent and creativity as being inextricably linked because being creative necessitates informed opposition against the prevailing educational hegemony. In particular, as Gibbons argues, the creative English teacher must inevitably question the managerialist ideology which dominates the school system at present. The effects of this managerialism is vividly felt in the dry, technocratic lexis which teachers are forced to use such as 'value-added', 'marking criteria', 'uplevelling', 'outcomes' and 'progress' etc. (Ball, 2004). The creative English teacher dissents against these narrow conceptions by using an alternative language which focuses upon the creative, aesthetic possibilities of the world. To this extent, my deployment of a new discourse about 'aesthetic learning' was a form of critical dissent.

Becoming a Learner

Spurred on by the excitement of learning about the aesthetics of eating childhood sweets, following the precepts laid out by Simon Wrigley and Jeni Smith with their 'Teachers as Writers' project (2012) which I will discuss in more depth later on, I wrote an extended 'dramatized' extract of my autobiography with my students, modelling with them how I used spider-diagrams and 'free writing' to 'get down' a 'first draft'.

'I don't worry about mistakes, I switch off all the nasty voices in my head which say 'I'm rubbish'. I enjoy the sensation of learning new stuff about myself as I write,' I said. (Gilbert, 2015)

I've found the ideas of one of Carol Dweck's most eloquent champions, Guy Claxton, particularly helpful in my own teaching. Influenced by Dweck's 'Growth Mindset' notions (Walters, 2015), Claxton (2011) contends that once teachers consciously adopt identities as learners, they become more effective. For example, Claxton argues that it is only when teachers make mistakes in front of their students and visibly learn from these errors, that they model to students the learning processes which are vital in order to become active learners (p. 82). Yet too often teachers feel obliged to present themselves like Marshall's 'Old Grammarians' as people who 'know' and never make mistakes (2000, p. 115). I am aware of this myself; I still am intimidated by the thought of admitting a mistake in front of my students. This is not how teacher identity is framed in the current climate with its emphasis upon performativity (Sachs, 2003; Day, 2007). And yet, there is mounting evidence that fostering an classroom atmosphere where students feel they can learn

from their mistakes is an effective way of raising achievement (Dweck et al., 2014, p. 3339: Kapur, 2014).

There is a political dimension here which Paulo Freire has drawn our attention to in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996: Smidt, 2014): once a teacher situates him/herself as a learner with his students, the classroom becomes more democratic and much more of a community of learning, with less emphasis upon the teacher 'oppressing' his/her students with knowledge and much more focus upon achieving 'praxis', communal understanding of a subject, particularly in the context of comprehending how knowledge is politically situated (Freire, 1996; Smidt, 2014; Watkins, 2010; Mayo, 2004).

Freirean ideas particularly came into play as I wrote my autobiography with my Year 7 students because I not only discussed the mistakes I'd made in my first draft, but I also encouraged my students to think about why I might have behaved the way I did as a child. The incident I wrote about was how I was bullied at school; this involved talking about my own social background and the background of the bully. In particular, a number of students noted how I was mocked because of the relative poverty of my parents; I had to carry my school books in a 'lady's' handbag because my mother claimed she didn't have enough money to get me a bag more fitting for her twelve-year-old son at an all-boys' school. A form of 'praxis' occurred because my students noted the effects of these age, gender and social-class related issues, and moreover felt free to explore these issues in their own autobiographies. (Gilbert, 2015). My 'opening out' to them helped many of them explore emotional moments in their own autobiographies: the child of a bitter divorce wrote about a special trip he took with his mentally ill mother who he rarely saw; a girl who normally presented herself as being very well behaved wrote about the rage and anger she felt in her

life; a number of students wrote about the terrors of moving from primary to secondary school or accidents they'd had (Gilbert, 2015). My relationship with my students became reciprocal: I had given something 'of myself' and they 'gave back' (Gilbert, 2012).

Practice and Aesthetic Learning

Like many teachers of creative writing, I have found that encouraging my students of all ages to do 'free' or 'automatic' writing (Cowan, 2011, p. 36) has been particularly effective in fostering first drafts of work that can be then re-worked. While many teachers deploy this approach (Dickson, 2001), it is against the hegemony in that many of my students when initially doing 'free writing' felt that their work should be 'perfect' immediately (Gilbert, 2015).

I explained that the secret to becoming an aesthetic learner is to find 'flow' and that free writing can be a good way of doing this. In a section called 'Flow and Learning' in his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1997), Mihalyi Csikseztmihaliyi stresses the importance of humans finding states of 'flow' which is achieved when they undertake 'painful, risky, difficult activities that stretch the person's capacity and involve an element of novelty and discovery' that cultivates an 'almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness' (p. 110).

I realised the importance of developing flow when I attended some National Writing Project teacher-writer workshops, run by Simon Wrigley and Jeni Smith. In their article *What has writing ever done for us? The power of teachers' writing groups*

Wrigley and Smith (2012) discuss the importance of teachers writing both expressively and transactionally both in and outside the classroom:

> *if we are to engage seriously with young people as they write…we need to have the personal knowledge not only of the craft but also of its complex and uncertain personal processes (p. 80)*

Their emphasis on the 'rights of the writer' was particularly significant; with rules such as writers not being forced to show their work publicly, I noticed they established an atmosphere which allowed the conditions of 'flow' to happen because the writers were not worrying about what other people might make of their work. This made me realise that for meaningful aesthetic learning to occur, the teacher plays an important role in establishing the right emotional and intellectual climate. Furthermore, Wrigley and Smith's championing of expressive writing – very much marginalised by the English curriculum – was an important lesson too:

> *When individuals write what matters to them, the value of writing is foregrounded and may well reveal what lessons might best help them improve. (2012, p. 82)*

Drawing upon James Britton's (1982) ideas in particular, Smith and Wrigley present an authoritative case that teachers need to work as expressive writers in order to teach writing effectively.

Aesthetic Learning: Definitions

The term 'aesthetic' shares many synergies with 'creativity', but it is different to the extent that it suggests both 'reaction' and 'action' whereas being 'creative' primarily implies 'action'. One does not have to 'create' a work of art to have an 'aesthetic experience' such as admiring a painting or piece of music, and yet I would argue that in order to create meaningful art, one has to have an 'aesthetic experience' (Dewey, 1964, p. 610). Moreover, the adjective 'creative' carries with it connotations that have

rebounded against English teachers, with the methods and ideas of 'creative English teacher' being widely mocked and condemned (Gove, 2013).

I've found the term 'aesthetic' disorients and intrigues students in a way that the word 'creative' does not; it enjoys both a degree of obscurity and also a wide spectrum of meanings, connoting 'appreciation', 'beauty', 'philosophy' and 'creative'. My students have benefitted from exploring its meanings, and it has helped them articulate experiences for which they have previously not found words.

This said, the word 'creative' needs to be embraced by the English teacher because it is such a powerful word with transformative possibilities. The cultural critic Raymond Williams perceived that being creative involved changing the world for the better and advocated that 'ordinary people' should become 'creative practitioners' who took risks in order to create a more equitable and joyful world (O'Connor, 2006, pp. 86-90).

Indeed, I found that after I had established the use of the phrase 'aesthetic learning' in my class and students were familiar with it, I was also able to deploy the word 'creative' as well, and had a number of discussions with students about the subtle shades of meanings of both terms with one perceptive student saying that being 'creative' sounded 'lively' and 'involving' whereas 'aesthetic' signalled a quality both 'secret' and 'thrilling'. From this, I took him to mean that there's a democratic atmosphere to 'creativity' while 'aesthetic' has a philosophical, inspirational quality to it. Both terms can be fruitfully employed by English teachers.

Aesthetic Learning and Cognition

From 2010, I constantly reinforced the message with my students (and myself) that writing is a voyage of discovery on many levels. Britton's point in *Writing to Learn and Learning to Write* (1982) that there is always an 'an element of "finding out", of exploration' in writing (p.110) is significant. Developing Britton's ideas further, Hayes and Flower (1981) put the case that writing is best understood as a set of 'distinctive thinking processes' with the act of composition being a 'goal-oriented thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals' which are established by their overall purposes and 'what has been learned in the act of writing' (p. 366). As a result, a 'recursive' process develops whereby the writer writes a section, reflects upon its effects, then either re-writes a segment if it is not creating the desired effects or moves forward to create new effects (p. 375). Building on the theories of Hayes/Flower and James Britton, Myhill and Watson (2011) argue it is this 'metacognitive' approach to writing which teachers need to instil in their students: 'writing is a process and teaching should support writers in thinking about and reflecting on their composing processes and the design choices they make in creating texts' (p. 69). They argue that relatively inexperienced writers are not aware of the processes that lead to more sophisticated writing. Thus, it's worth more proficient writers should explore their own processes in depth so that they can then share their ideas about their processes with less practiced writers (Smith, Wrigley; Cremin, Myhill p. 130).

I write fiction because I wanted my readers to undergo 'aesthetic experiences' as they read my work; to interpret and feel the meaning of my 'emotionalized images' (Dewey, 1964, p. 608). I wanted my readers to go on the 'aesthetic learning journey'

that I experienced while writing my fiction; I wanted my readers to learn - in the broad sense of the term -- with me as they read my stories; in this sense, I write with a reader in mind. The most accomplished writers are also seasoned readers (Cremin T., Myhill D., 2012), and perceive the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing, but as Cremin and Baker's research shows, many English teachers are not as confident writers as they are readers, and this has a negative impact upon their teaching (2010, p. 4).

What Rosenblatt calls the aesthetic 'drive' is at the heart of much writing and reading of literature. She posits that an 'aesthetic response' must entail 'a free, uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art or literature as an absolutely necessary condition of sound literary judgment' (1938/1995, p. 72), pointing out that:

> *The aesthetically-driven reader . . . must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that these words and their referents arouse in him. (1978, p. 27)*

As an English teacher, I know that the most effective readers are the ones who don't immediately seek to 'decipher' but enjoy the 'associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas' which 'arouse'. For example, when confronted with a difficult poem, their immediate response is not 'I don't get it!' but 'this is interesting…these words make me think/feel this or that…'.

From this aesthetic response, they can then begin to work out the possible meanings of a poem. In other words, once the 'aesthetic drive' has been stimulated, then the cognitive/reflective processes that Flowers/Hayes and Myhill/Watson describe come into play. This is why, for me, the concept of the 'aesthetic learner' is so powerful; it labels explicitly what is at the heart of meaningful reading and writing

within many contexts in the English classroom, namely the need to pay attention to 'associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas' that 'words…arouse' (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The aesthetic educator deploys all the senses to stimulate an aesthetic response. There is a reciprocal relationship between word and the world (Freire, 1996); I believe my example of the 'sweets' illustrated this. Other effective examples of this commonly used by English teachers are: drumming or finger-tapping to get students to appreciate the rhythm of a poem; drawing pictures in response to a descriptive passage; acting out the written word; freeze-frames etc, many of which are discussed in *The Full English* (Blake, 2006).

Aesthetic Education and Identity

I've found that 're-configuring' my identity as a writer has helped my writing considerably. To call oneself an 'aesthetic learner' as opposed to a 'writer' affords two major conceptual shifts: It situates one's professional identity within an educational context; it enables one to claim leverage over other art forms and experiences which may, on the surface, lie outside the province of writing.

To deal with the first of these points, I've found that labelling myself as a learner has taken much of the fear out of writing. Bazeman (2009) talks about 'the burden of the poet': most writers suffer from the expectations generated from the traditions that they work in.

It's my contention that the 'aesthetic learner' has the humility to embrace and profit from this situation. For example, when I was teaching William Blake's poetry to my Sixth Form classes, I encouraged my students to learn from the poetic forms, ideas and imagery of Blake, asking them to write their own poetry in response to his. In order to model this, I wrote my own poems in the spirit of an 'aesthetic learner',

penning my own versions of 'London' (Blake, 1995, p. 73). I talked to my students about how I wanted to achieve certain emotional and imagistic effects with my poem which shared some similarities with Blake's, saying I wanted to describe how segregated the communities were in the capital. I wrote:

I wander through the privatised streets

Near where the private waters of the Thames flow

And see in every face I meet the suspicion

That I might mug them with a nasty blow.

I am not going to pretend this is 'great poetry'; I wrote it on the spot in front of my A Level class, talking about how I was using Blake's structures and ideas, but how I wanted to 'update' the poem, using words like 'privatised' instead of 'chartered'. I presented myself as an 'aesthetic learner' not as a 'creative writer', which was important because it released me from the 'burden of the poet' having to write something both new and technically accomplished. However, we discussed the 'aesthetic qualities' of the poem, the connotations of some of the words I used such as 'private', 'suspicion' and 'blow', and compared them with the words Blake used. The students then wrote about the similarities and differences between my verse and Blake's, with some students being very critical of the poetic qualities of what I had written; having presented myself as a 'learner', this was perfectly acceptable. They then wrote their own versions of 'London', and clearly enjoyed the experience, with their versions being read aloud towards the end of the lesson. Finally, I asked them to write a comparison between their versions of the poem with Blake's. This generated a great deal of interesting commentary, which was, in my estimation, far superior to the analysis they had been doing before. For example, one student had written a poem about how she walks amongst the 'council flats' 'chicken takeaways'

'fortified homes' and 'luxury penthouses' in London, seeing the wealthy in their expensive cars, and homeless people, prostitutes and drug-addicts on the streets. She was able to point out in her essay how the landscape of London had changed but the overall 'structure' (her word) of the city was similar to Blake's London in the way people are excluded and exploited. Other students talked about the way they used concrete nouns to evoke a sense of place in the way Blake did, with the majority of them revealing that the poem had an emotional meaning for them because they were able to compare it with their own writing.

David Stevens discusses a similar approach to Blake in *The Art of Teaching Secondary English*. He shows how, with his A Level class, he used 'collage work, dramatic approaches such as hot-seating and scripted meetings between different characters…and musical interpretations' (2004, p. 45); it's clear that these creative activities in combination with more analytical ones such as investigating Blake's social context nurtured what Stevens terms 'a vivid sense of textual engagement through elaborating on rather than simply analysing the art itself.' I found that my presentation of myself as an 'aesthetic learner' greatly assisted me in nurturing both creative and analytical responses to Blake. One student B., who had been quite badly behaved in class until I started writing 'Blake-style' poems, said: 'It's like you're not afraid to get down and dirty with us sir. We all enjoyed laughing at your stupid rhymes, and that made us want to do better.' (Gilbert, 2015). This notion of 'getting down and dirty' emboldened me to produce my own musical versions of Blake's poems, and set up a blog for me and my students to post their thoughts about the poetry (Gilbert, 2013); they did not want to put their poems on the blog, but were happy to post their analyses.

Aesthetic Learning and Shakespeare

The scrapping of the Key Stage 3 tests, sometimes known as Standard
Assessment Tests (SATs), in 2008 enabled me embrace much more aesthetic ways
of teaching Shakespeare. In previous years (1993-2007), I had spent much of Year 9
preparing my students for these 'high-stakes' exams which, in part, required students
to write detailed literary criticism on a prescribed Shakespeare play; their abolition
meant I was much freer to pursue the curriculum that I felt my students needed. My
new conceptions about 'aesthetic learning' enabled me to situate familiar
pedagogies. Previously, I had used Rex Gibson's *Teaching Shakespeare* (1998) and
National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) resources on Shakespeare
(Thomas, 2010) in a piecemeal and unconfident fashion. Before developing my
concepts of aesthetic learning, I had, for the most part, taken a 'cognitive' approach
to Shakespeare with my students; my primary aim was to help them analyse
Shakespeare's language and dramatic techniques in depth and answer very
predictable, dry 'SATs-style' questions on these areas. However, once I realised that
my goal should be to instil aesthetic appreciation, I felt much freer to trial what I had
formerly seen as 'risky' approaches to the Bard. Previously, I'd seen them as
dangerous because they were not specifically 'exam-oriented' and might make my
classes noisy and disruptive. My reconfiguring of my identity to that of being an
'aesthetic educator and learner' stopped me being overly concerned by these 'risks'.

As a result of taking an aesthetically educative approach, I did not start with the
text, but with representations of Shakespeare that students might appreciate more.
For example, I deployed various teaching strategies using filmed versions of the
relevant Shakespeare play in my initial lessons (Thomas, 2010, p. 100). Having

intrigued my students through film, I moved on to asking my students to examine

Shakespeare's language in depth: I guided them to edit, improvise around and

modernize a scene, with students performing their own modernized version in the

drama studio (Thomas, 2010, p. 47). It was only after this experience that they wrote

an essay about how and why they modernized the scene. With this approach, very

little is explained directly by the teacher – there is hardly any 'lecturing' involved --

and students are much more actively engaged in the work; they are required to

construct their own 'varieties' of Shakespeare. I did this, in part, by pointing out that

Shakespeare freely adapted different sources for his plays. For example, when

teaching *Romeo and Juliet* for GCSE, I asked my students to construct their own

narrative outline using a summary I wrote for Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragicall*

History of Romeus and Juliet, Nashe's *Have With You To Saffron Walden*, and

excerpts from a translation of Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Shakespeare, 2012).

From this, students learnt of the 'borrowed' nature of Shakespeare and this helped

them feel more confident about devising their own modernised versions. In some

cases, I videoed students' productions, with their full permissions etc., and they then

evaluated their scripts, ideas and performances.

   In the current context, this is risky pedagogy. According to Pasi Sahlberg, most

teachers in the "developed world" now work in what he dubs the "GERM" era: the

Global Educational Reform Movement. Sahlberg argues the GERM regime seeks to:

impose a stringent set of accountability tests and procedures upon schools; a

narrowing of the curriculum with a marginalising of the arts/humanities; and a shift

from teacher-run schools to more corporate structures where companies and policy

makers decide what happens in the classroom (2016). In this setting, a dangerous

aesthetic pervades my pedagogical approaches, even though they have been shown

to be effective (Olive, 2012) because they implicitly suggest that learners have the 'power' and the 'right' to adapt Shakespeare's language into something they find entertaining. Possibly paradoxically, I found on the basis of my grading of essays, that my students' cognitive knowledge of Shakespeare was significantly better than when I had taken a more 'upfront' lecture-based approach. By working in groups and with the teacher, children can come to a communal understanding of Shakespeare, which is mediated through their own experiences. Stevens makes an important point when he says: 'To make radical social meaning in the context of teaching and learning, creativity needs to be situated in a coherent place of values' (p. 33). I would agree with Stevens that ultimately these values need to be rooted in 'an ambition to seek to change the world for the better, enhancing the quality of life – especially in the active embodiment of aesthetic and celebratory dimensions' (p. 39).

This concept of 'communal learning' is very important for the writer and lecturer bell hooks. In her chapter 'Keepers of Hope' (hooks, 2003) hooks quotes the educator Ron Scraps because he talks about the 'need to establish a genuine sense of trust' (p. 109). When I have lectured to students at considerable length about the meanings of specific words, I have found that they have not enjoyed the experience: I have not trusted them to find out about him by themselves and this has had a significant impact upon their attitudes towards Shakespeare (Gilbert, 2015).

Conclusions

By examining my own creative writing, teaching and learning practices, I have argued that 'aesthetic learning' is a useful concept for English teachers to consider on two levels.

First, conceptions of 'aesthetic learning' are a development of existing thinking in the field of what might loosely be called 'creative' or 'aesthetic' education, in that they offer explanations of learning processes which have been marginalised and belittled by the educational hegemony; namely that if we are to instil enjoyment in students of English we need to acknowledge that an 'aesthetic drive' is vital to nurture (Rosenblatt, 1978). Furthermore, the discourses of aesthetics offer a useful language to English teachers with which to analyse, research and investigate writing and reading processes.

Second, I argue it is helpful for English teachers, creative writers and learners to consider themselves as 'aesthetic learners' because perceiving themselves in this way leads to them viewing their learning and writing processes as being intrinsically educational and nourishing: aesthetic learning embraces a far wider remit than contracted conceptions of cognitive learning. Significantly, the aesthetic learner reflects deeply upon his/her own feelings about whatever he/she is working on, using these reflections to construct new realms of knowledge. While there will inevitably be a cognitive and factual element to this new knowledge, it is the 'aesthetic knowledge' that they construct which is of primary importance. Thus, it could be argued that conceptions of 'aesthetic learning' challenge mechanistic ideas of education which are prevalent in educational institutions today.

As I have illustrated in the article, aesthetic conceptualizations of teaching can be fruitfully adopted in contemporary English classrooms and can lead to teachers constructing successful, creative lessons.

Furthermore, there is a moral component to aesthetic learning. Adopting the identity of an 'aesthetic learner' brings a degree of equality between teacher and

student which assists in establishing 'a genuine sense of community based on trust' (hooks, 2003, p. 109).

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