Chapter 14
Aesthetic Decisions of Instructors and Instructional Designers

Patrick Parrish
University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, USA

ABSTRACT

The same qualities that make works of art beautiful, meaningful, or at times even transformative in our lives also underlie our best learning experiences. This study sought to better understand the relationship between art and instruction by looking at how aesthetics underlie the design decisions of teachers and instructional designers. Five instructional designers and teachers were interviewed about a course or online learning product they had recently designed. The interviews explored the design decisions they had made based on how they imagined learners would experience the instruction at its beginning, middle, and ending. Participants discussed the introduction of tension to enhance engagement, worked to achieve a coherent experience for learners through narrative qualities, and demonstrated concern for the immediacy of their learners' experiences, discussing the expected thoughts and feelings of learners at each stage of the course or module.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of all education and training professions is to make sure learners take away useful knowledge and skills. But some practitioners also realize that the way to ensure that deep learning will happen is to help learners become engaged in a process of self transformation. For this reason, many instructional providers focus on crafting learning *experiences*, not simply conveying content and assessing learning. For example, some instructional providers place "increased emphasis on the qualitative immediacy of experience, on its unity and wholeness, on its emotional underpinnings, on the temporal unfolding of events" (Jackson, 1998, p. 181), and put care in developing details of their instruction that may seem, on the surface, only peripherally related to its subject matter, and only minimally implied by standard instructional strategies. This chapter will show that some instruc-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-985-9.ch014

tional providers use approaches that can best be described as *aesthetic* in their work to heighten the learning experience,.

Instructional design, coming from a tradition of applying scientific and engineering principles to instruction, can be seen as conflicting with the traditional craft-orientation of most educators (Rose, 2002). However, even in the work of many instructional designers there exists an artistic thrust that guides the design of products considered of high quality by clients and learners. This study will demonstrate that in the minds of the instructional designers who participated, the same qualities that make works of art beautiful, meaningful, and at times transformative also underlie the most successful learning experiences. The goal of this study was to understand the relationship between art and instruction by looking at the ways in which aesthetics underlie the design decisions of teachers and instructional designers. Its purpose is not to diminish the value of science for instruction, but to reconsider aesthetics as a core foundation for instructional practice, alongside science. In fact, the study relies on social scientific approaches in its attempts to uncover the underlying aesthetics of instructional practice.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In common parlance, *aesthetics* describes our experience of and passion for creating art, but John Dewey saw it as applying more broadly as a kind of everyday experience (1934/1989). Dewey argued that aesthetics described a prevalent and essential kind of experience, one that is particularly heightened and felt to be especially meaningful—one flush with transformative potential. It is this kind of experience that artists seek to create or recreate in their work. In this sense, aesthetic experience can exist not only in our engagement with the arts, but in all activity, perhaps especially in activities involving learning. But the concept of *aesthetics* has had many interpretations, and Dewey's is by no means representative. This section will first briefly describe some competing aesthetic theories before outlining his Pragmatist theory. This theory is worth significant discussion because it is important to move beyond clichéd and superficial conceptions of art and aesthetics in order to see its application to learning and instruction.

Aesthetics is commonly used in at least two senses, both of which are applicable to this study. In one sense, *aesthetics* describes the strategies or principles employed by artists in creating their work. Essays like Aristotle's Poetics (trans. 1984) primarily explore this aspect. But *aesthetics* is also the name for the philosophical tradition that explores the impact of the arts on our lives, why we call some things art and not others, the relationship of artists to their work, and why humans have a passion for creating and engaging with works of art even when they have no apparent practical value. This philosophical tradition, especially in recent history, has led to many different interpretations. Some have said that art is our way of making certain things in our world "special" or distinct from everyday experience—an attempt to celebrate our humanity or to attach increased human meaning to things (Dissanayake, 1995). Connor (1999) points to another school of thought that suggests that the function of art is to create a useful distraction for the miseries we encounter, or to provide a cathartic mechanism for working out "issues and anxieties which… cannot be addressed directly" (Functionalist theories of the aesthetic, para. 3). Others have claimed that *art* is merely a classification of artifacts defined by social institutions as suitable for public appreciation (Dickie, 1989). In other words, this view holds that aesthetics exists only as a socially created convention, and that artists are simply skilled crafts persons with attached celebrity, but without additional purpose. This attempts to explain the recent predilection for innovation and the emergence of radically non-traditional examples of modernist and postmodernist art. But Berleant (1991) takes a less cynical tack and posits "engagement" as