

Lessons Used for Millennia Must Not Be Lost—Adding Values to Higher Educational Programs through Arts and Aesthetics: A Literature Study

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Abstract

Through a historical perspective, the overall aim with this study is to deepen the understanding of arts and aesthetics, in relation to health, for the beneficial use in higher education programs. Since prehistoric time, mankind has been using different art forms for health reasons. Artwork created by a society is a product of the culture that prevails within that society. Aesthetics is connected to art, and it spans over a wider field than just art. This literature review study brings different historical views on arts, aesthetics, and creativity. The human need for art, music and health is essentially the same through the ages. By bringing in a historical perspective on the healing powers of art and aesthetics we can be better equipped to reintroduce arts in higher education also as a healthy factor. We need to understand our history to be able to create an understanding of the healthy meaning of art for future higher education students. Lessons that have been used for millennia must not be lost.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Arts, Creativity, Health, Music, Music History

1. Introduction

Arts and health are an expanding research field, and it is therefore relevant to approach this fast-growing research area by bringing in historical perspectives and combining artistic ideas with science. This could help us to increase and develop our knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and use of

arts related to aesthetics, ethics, health, and creativity, with help from a historical contextualization. During the last 20 years, different research questions in arts and science, and its relation to learning processes have challenged us and therefore historical data could add new values to today's educational systems.

Arts and culture are two things that go hand in hand. Artwork created by a society is a product of the culture that prevails within that society, and therefore one can see that art and culture are interlinked. Art is an aspect of culture. Art is strongly influenced by culture and is born as a by-product of culture (Bojner Horwitz & Thyrés, 2022).

The arts can have many different forms and can be defined as different artistic activities (process) such as 1) visual arts (paintings, sculpture, photography), 2) performing arts (dance, theatre, music, film, and 3) applied arts (architecture, industrial design) (Fancourt, 2017). All those aspects and forms of arts are related to aesthetics which has been interpreted as “the science of sense knowledge” (Bale, 2010). Originally inspired by the ancient Greece word *Aisthesis*, the concept was established in the 18th Century by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762) (Bale, 2010). He understood aesthetics as a spiritual ability to perceive many different “sense impressions” and combined them into a coherent whole. According to Baumgarten, aesthetics has an intrinsic value and is therefore autonomous. In today's higher education, aesthetics is associated with many artistic programs (Bale, 2010).

Weitz (1956) claims that aesthetics primary purpose is to define the essence of art.

Although aesthetics is connected to art, it spans over a wider field than just art. Knowledge is never independent of aesthetics and the aesthetic aspect is part of all knowledge (Molander, 1995). There is a subjectivity and an embodiment in all statements that contain aesthetics. These aesthetic aspects bring information to life—a sort of human meaning-making process (Molander, 1995). Aesthetics is also a branch of philosophy that explores arts and related concepts such as interpretation and creativity (Bale, 2010). Creative skill can be defined as specialization or expertise, and creative ability in music can be seen as preparatory for creative competence in many varied and optional areas (Gullö and Thyrés, 2019). In this article we embrace aesthetics as part of the learning process where arts, specifically music, will be in our focus.

The aim with this paper is through the lens of a historical perspective, deepen the understanding of arts and aesthetics, for the beneficial use of health and creativity in higher education programs.

To fulfil the aim, the following research questions have been addressed:

How can historical perspectives on arts, aesthetics and creativity add value to higher education and in what way could these perspectives benefit students' health?

2. Method

As an empirical basis for the analysis, a literature study has been chosen with the

following focus areas: aesthetics, arts, creativity, health, music and history. With a phenomenological lens, all the focus areas were interpreted via two researchers' domains of expertise:

- 1) a music historical and musicological expertise
- 2) a music and health expertise

The following databases together with a rich reference literature (see reference list) have been used: Academic Search Ultimate (ASU), Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet (DiVA), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Grove Music Online, Journal Storage (JSTORE) and PubMed.

3. Result

3.1. Artistic Activities in Ancient Time

Since prehistoric time, mankind has been expressing and used arts as health through music. Music is a vital characteristic of human nature and humans have a need for musical expressions that have been with us from the earliest days of our existence. Music lives within our bodies and souls (Valkare, 2016). From a biological perspective, there probably never was a *homo amusicus* (Valkare, 2016).

3.2. The Human Body as a Musical Instrument

The human body constituted the very first musical instrument. The human voice was used for singing, accompanied by handclapping and feet stomp to keep the rhythm going. Singing developed simultaneously as speech and as soon as speech evolved, it was augmented by tonal pitch to distinguish words and by various sounds such as percussive clicks, whistles, and humming to accentuate them. The voice was the primary instrument and tool of the shaman who used it in rituals and for healing (Blenkinsop et al., 2013). Rituals had an important function to create a connection with dead ancestors and animals, with the benign or malevolent spiritual forces that were thought to control human fate. The rituals were conducted through spoken word and singing, music and dance (Blenkinsop et al., 2013).

3.3. The Acoustics in Caves

Within the caves, there was a close relation between music and art. Inside the dark caves, it was a necessity to navigate through the small passages by singing, using sounds rather than vision to find one's way home. Caves, such as Lascaux in France, are well-known for the art paintings decorating the walls. Reznikoff (2005) has discussed an interesting relation between the artwork and music. Humans used the acoustics and the resonance in the caves to guide them exactly where to paint their artwork, and carefully chose the spaces where the resonance was the greatest, meaning where the music would sound as good as possible. The more resonance, the more paintings on the walls. The voice and the hearing

were hence used as a sensitive sonar device. Using this method empirically in his research, Reznikoff (2005) has stated that it *de facto* works: “in many cases, proceeding into the direction of the strongest answer of the cave will lead to the locations of paintings” (Reznikoff, 2005). Acoustically, a resonant space with a long reverberation time has a natural way of transforming speech into singing and idiomatically lends itself to singing in a way that a less resonant space with a shorter reverberation time does not (Reznikoff, 2005).

3.4. Early Musical Instruments

Through creativity and innovation, humans started to enhance and accompany their singing by making musical instruments (Fancourt, 2017). Early musical instruments were created from dead animals and wood. String instruments were made from a combination of animal guts and wood. Flutes were developed by cutting finger holes in bones from dead animals. Stretched skins were used to create drums and tambourins (Blenkinsop et al., 2013). Musical instruments are represented as art in the paintings on cave walls. The experience of art was further enhanced by creating the illusion of moving images by stirring a torch near the wall to illuminate the paintings (West, 2008).

3.5. Health and Healing

Health and healing rituals were expressed by means of art, music, dance, theatrics, and sculptures (Fancourt, 2017). Shamanic rituals may have functioned not only symbolic but as health-promoting activities, helping to reduce anxiety and to regulate emotions. Rituals could also stimulate and release social bonding hormones like oxytocin and neuropeptides such as beta-endorphin. Musical activities, in particular singing, helped to bond social groups and create stronger communities, supporting the health of both individuals and communities (Fancourt, 2017).

3.6. Song and Dance

Remnants of music’s first age are still available today in some parts of Africa and Australia. For instance, the Venda, a Southern African Bantu people, living near the South African-Zimbabwean border, has been studied by the English anthropologist John Blacking (1973). He describes how song and dance are basically intertwined in rituals as the most important means of socializing young people who must be integrated into the Venda society and learn practical rules of living and ethical values (Blacking, 1973).

3.7. Writing in Relation to Arts and Health

The first civilizations, formed between 8.000 and 3.500 BCE, can be categorized by the development of the written word, which had a profound impact on all aspects of life. It started simply by drawing and writing with a stylus pen in soft clay. The art of writing made it possible to preserve and accumulate knowledge

(Valkare, 2016). It also gave a perceptual idea of historical perspectives and was beneficial for future health and medical purposes.

3.8. Music, Singing and Dance—Ritual Building

The written word took over from music and dance as the main focal point in rituals (Valkare, 2016) although music was still one important element in rituals. It became more professionalized and somewhat separated from dance (Valkare, 2016). Music was also commonly used utilitarian by shepherds (cf. the young King David, who later became a music therapist) and field workers, and as a powerful military tool in warfare, handling drums and trumpets to communicate signals and rally the troops, and to terrify the enemy (Kjellberg, 2007). Anthropological studies indicate that live music and dance performances are practically inseparable in nonliterate societies, and that music and dance are at the very core in rituals, to consolidate social values, interpret how the world works, strengthen both individual and communal identities and motivate territorial claims (Valkare, 2016).

3.9. Cultivate Communication

When civilizations progressed around the Mediterranean, notably in ancient Greece and later Rome, music and dance developed in new directions. The Greeks explored vital aspects such as the essence of music, the impact of music on man, and—at the intersection of mythology and saga—cultivated the ability to dramatically communicate a narrative on the origins of music. They carefully studied music's acoustic characteristics and created scales, tone systems and basic notation (Kjellberg, 2007).

3.10. Ethic and Aesthetic

In ancient Greece, musical theorists, and philosophers such as Damon and Plato, proposed state control over music as a public health measure (West, 2008). Theories about the human response to music and art, were being addressed through the teaching of ethos. In ethos, dichotomies were used to distinguish between ethic and aesthetic purposes of musicking, regarding aspects such as vocal vs. instrumental music, educational learning vs. playing for pleasure, in functional or non-functional contexts, non-virtuoso or virtuoso musicians, amateurs vs. professionals. Amateur musicians enjoyed a higher status than professionals (Blenkinsop et al., 2013; Hanning, 2010; Horden, 2008; Kjellberg, 2007). A study by Grape et al. (2003) indicates that amateur musicians today enjoy many health benefits, while professional musicians may experience stress and other burnout factors.

3.11. Ancient Rome and Health Perspectives

Some aspects of Rome are particularly interesting from a health perspective. During antiquity, the attitude towards illness, handicap, and dysfunctionality

was that it was seen as an insult and that the responsibility lay with the Gods, i.e. not with the humans (Horden, 2008). The result was cruel abandonment. Ironically, the situation was reversed when Rome's fourth emperor, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, known as Claudius—who suffered from spastic paralyzes and epilepsy as well as a noticeable limp and slight deafness—became the most powerful man on earth (Graves, 1934). Not only was he the emperor of Rome but even declared a God, with his own temple in Colchester, the capital city in the Roman province Britannia (Graves, 1934).

How can these historical perspectives add aesthetic value to our educational system and in what way could these perspectives benefit health? If we go back in time, we see that almost all knowledge dissemination to younger generations involved cultural and aesthetic ingredients. Singing and drawing and making music was part of the curricula. Mentors were working together with artists to be able to deepen the aesthetical beauty of knowledge building (Fancourt, 2017). Aesthetic aspects brought information to life and created meaning, thereby adding health.

4. Discussion

Throughout history, man has used arts as a source of power to be inspired, informed and transformed. At Dionysus cultures, for example, in the 5th century BC, thousands of people danced and sang every night to achieve a state of ecstasy. Later in history, we see the dervishes dancing until they attained a state of ecstasy or spiritual insight (Garfinkel, 2003). This extasy was part of a healing process and the word catharsis was used to explain this mechanism. It can be compared with today's club culture, and we could today measure oxytocin levels to follow the transcendental phases (Bojner Horwitz, 2004). Today, dance is rarely part of the curricula in higher education, and we have seen in research reports that our students would like to dance more in relation to other subjects to be able to increase their creative capacity (Bojner Horwitz and Thyrés, 2022). "Doing something that you are not good at helps creativity flowing" (Bojner Horwitz and Thyrés, 2022). This is new data that could be easy to apply in our academies. Starting to do dance movements before an examination or to alternate dance with heavy teaching blocks, is something that students suggest (Bojner Horwitz and Thyrés, 2022).

4.1. The Need of Aesthetical Perspectives

The arts have been central in every civilization throughout the world and in every culture.

Human beings have always used the ability of art to transcend. When creating sacred places and buildings, art was always placed at the center, where the task of art was to change the level of human consciousness. Temples and churches have the purpose of helping people find peace and quietfulness and get in touch with deeper inner values through art, music, narratives, and architecture (Bojner

Horwitz, 2011). In our academies of today, the environment is an important factor when creating creative ideas (Bojner Horwitz and Thyrés, 2022). Today we have evidence that shows that the appearance and aesthetics of the premises with contact with green environment is important for learning and cognitive flexibility (Stenfors, Bojner Horwitz et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important when refurbishing our classrooms and school buildings, that the aesthetical perspectives are considered.

4.2. The Importance of Rituals

People usually sing and use music and art for rituals (birth, death, marriage, etc.), so rituals are very important for our existential understanding of life (Viper et al., 2020). Unfortunately, rituals are not often used in higher education, more a concept for small children (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022a). To create a schedule where different artistic activities take place as a routine or ritual as an obvious part of the curricula would be important to evaluate. One such study (Spychiger, 2002) says that music activities can even influence study results into the right direction only if it is done once a week.

4.3. Early Civilizations and Its Longevity

Early civilizations developed in China, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome (Hanning, 2010). We need to ask ourselves, why did these cultures developed and why did they survive? Some facts show that arts and aesthetics, music and dance, are key variables that functions as an important glue in creating communities and holding societies together. Longevity of a society deepens of aesthetic variables, as can be observed in the Roman Empire (Fleischhauer, 2001).

In the cultures discussed above, arts have been used both indirectly and directly in relation to health. For instance, art and music can be observed throughout history as a powerful tool for therapy, e.g. by Pythagoras, King David, Hildegard von Bingen, Paracelsus, Marsilio Ficino, Franz Liszt, Rudolf Steiner, Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins (Horden, 2008). Arts and drawings seen in old caves did also have a purpose to serve meaning-making and health, and dance movements played an important role in rituals where rhythm and sound could transform people's conscious levels and add well-being and trust. Another factor related to aesthetics and health are the environmental factors where green areas and water added mindful and peaceful minds. This research has lately also expanded the last 10 years (Stenfors et al., 2015; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2020).

4.4. Developing and Communicating Arts in Higher Education Programs

As seen in the prehistoric period, mankind had a holistic approach to art, music, and health. Aesthetic values through different art forms need to continue to be a natural part in our higher educational programs. The students demand increased

aesthetic contact during their education (Bojner Horwitz and Thyrén, 2022) to be able to create. We need to better integrate visual arts, performing arts and applied arts in the curricula and invite students to share their point of views and needs.

4.5. Motivate New Curricula Reconstructions

Another interesting finding from our historical literature review, is that acoustical, the visual and the movements (handclapping, body movements and dance) were rituals and rites of passages that were used for the transformation between the power of the artwork into well-being. We have data (Bojner Horwitz, 2014) related to dance, music, paintings, drama that only used for 3 months, did increase the well-being in people who were stressed. We see many students that drop out from academic programs because of stress and exhaustion (Appelgren et al., 2019; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2013; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2018). This motivates us to reconstruct the curricula into a more sustained content where art forms the basis and serves as a core subject for other theoretical subjects.

4.6. Acoustic Health

We now realize how to take acoustic health effects into consideration. Measurements in classrooms indicates that the volume is too loud and disturbing (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022b in progress). Aesthetics is to a great extent connected to sound volume and could therefore disrupt learning processes.

We have seen from the literature that people created instruments to enhance and accompany the human voices were used (Blenkinsop et al., 2013; Fancourt, 2017; Raynaud, 2020; Valkare, 2016). The development of the human voice is importance for self-development (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022b in progress). Singing is a source of self-development. Through the voice we get in touch with the body and through the body we become aware of our needs. Studies from our group are following elementary students to see how they are affected emotionally, cognitively, and physically, after singing lessons in school once a day for three months (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022b in progress).

4.7. Downregulation Risks

We also know that the handcraft in creating musical instruments (from dead animals) and woods were important aspects of the rites of passages of health. Using the hands to make useful objects is today a rare activity in schools. Through the movement of the hand, we make sense of what we are doing and create a deeper connection with our leaning. It was a survival factor to be able to make objects and therefore it is conceivable that the time our students use their hands is often very rarely during school hours. The aesthetical dimension of the artistic work and its embodied reflexions are something which is currently being downregulated in our school systems. This could have consequences for our student's health and not least their learning skills.

4.8. Meaning Making and Health in Academia through Arts

The mythology of shaman healing power could be interpreted as today's counselor or student health ("Studenhälsan"). A lot of "apps" contribute to a rich range of health apps that today's students use. Everything from mindfulness to contemplation exercises guided by health-conscious gurus. In our postmodern time we may rely too much on the technology and hence alienates us from our own embodied reading. To practice awareness regularly during the school day should be as important as knowledge acquisition. The only thing is that we have not made time for perhaps the most important knowledge—being able to take care of one's health. Historical perspectives on arts and aesthetics relation to health need to be lifted to the surface and reused in our academic institutions to stimulate health, meaning making, learning and social cohesion (Bojner Horwitz and Thyren, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The human need for art, music and health is essentially the same through the ages. By bringing in a historical perspective on the healing powers of art and aesthetics, we can be better equipped to reintroduce arts in higher education as a healthy factor. We sometimes forget the natural ways to recreate homeostasis, health and learning and our references provide us with new conditions to continue to learn from the history. Taking all this new knowledge into account, our recommendation is to more regularly add historical perspectives on aesthetics into the curriculum of higher education. By doing this, we don't repeat previous mistakes in downregulating aesthetical meaning and can instead increase our knowledge development in improving health aspects through arts and aesthetics for the benefit of the next generation's sustainability. This can be achieved by singing, musicking and dancing in performance practices and linking this to higher education curricula to encourage creativity, joy, and flow and thereby stimulate health. We learn from history to create an understanding of the healthy meaning of art for higher education future students. Lessons that have been used for millennia must not be lost.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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