



# Examining the aesthetic dimensions of teaching: Relationships between teacher knowledge, identity and passion

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## ABSTRACT

Having an appreciation for the subject, their students and what the subject can offer their students has both cognitive and emotional dimensions for teachers. This paper uses empirical data to explore the efficacy of a Deweyan inspired framework called “Aesthetic Understanding” to scrutinise relationships between teacher knowledge, identity and passion. The paper uses case study data of three teachers of maths and/or science generated from a video study to illustrate the relationships between the three elements of Aesthetic Understanding. The need to value the aesthetic dimensions of teaching when examining the subject-specific nature of secondary teaching is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A tradition of subject specialisation at the secondary level in Australia and internationally has meant that teachers are educated in disciplinary knowledge, and subject-specific knowledge of how and what to teach in schools and of how children learn. In most cases, secondary teachers have a history of engaging with a subject and discipline from school, university, the workplace or life, establishing certain attitudes and preferences that they may bring into the classroom. In mathematics and science, teachers trained in one will often be expected to teach both, sometimes regardless of training, because there is a belief that they share “linear ways of approaching things, step-by-step procedures, quantitative methods, and a mature paradigm” (Siskin, 1994, p. 174). However, maths and science are distinguishable epistemologically and methodologically, and these differences are represented in the subject matter, pedagogies and purposes associated with their respective school versions.

The study reported in this paper examined the roles of the subject in shaping pedagogical differences and teachers’ orientation to their teaching. Throughout the study I became aware of the specific needs and experiences of the “out-of-field” teacher, highlighting the subject-specific and more general aspects of what it means to be a subject teacher. This practice of teaching out-of-field

has the potential to impact on teacher quality. But in what ways, and how could this effect be evaluated? Being clear about what constitutes a quality teacher is essential for teacher educators preparing the next generation of teachers, for principals making decisions about who to appoint, for schools setting up school leadership teams, for those writing and implementing policy on education, and for researchers as they unravel the many complexities of the education scene.

A number of themes emerged from the study, one of which related to the aesthetic dimension of teaching and how this aesthetic might be tied to subject. In this paper I examine these aesthetic dimensions of teaching, focussing specifically on the important dimensions of teacher passion, coherence and identity, and how such a framework might assist in teacher reflection and evaluation.

Various frameworks have been developed over the years to evaluate and inform discussions about what teachers (should) do and know, what drives them, and how they see themselves. For example, the *Principles of Effective Teaching and Learning* (PoLT) by the Victorian Department of Education and Training consists of seven principles that describe how teachers should teach and create learning environments. Shulman’s (1986, 1987) classification of teacher knowledge sets out different types of knowledge domains, with pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK) as the areas of knowledge that educators and researchers most commonly focus on (see, for example, Loughran, Berry, & Mulhall, 2006). Other theoretical lenses that examine how teachers see themselves

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include, for example, teacher identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and self-efficacy (Boaler & Greeno, 2000). What drives teachers in their practice has been explored through research on motivation (Locke & Latham, 2004) and teacher passion (Day, 2004). Some researchers examine the relationship between these things. For example, Day (2004) states that self-efficacy, which is “the self-belief of teachers that they can exert a positive effect on their students’ success, is a key mediating factor in sustaining a passion for teaching” (p.72). Helms (1998) focuses on the relationship between subject matter and teacher identity, but adopts the term “sense of self”.

Despite interest in these constructs, the issue of teacher interest and identity in relation to the subjects they teach and how this affects teacher self-efficacy and fulfilment are poorly addressed in literature on teacher effectiveness. Even less represented are frameworks that encompass relationships of knowledge to their subject commitments and socio-historical interactions with the subject. Research into relationships between teacher characteristics and student outcomes, at least in the US, typically look to external factors for predictors of effectiveness, such as level of certification, type of degree and coursework, college ratings and test scores (Wayne & Youngs, 2003), and how teacher preparation links to practice (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). While these technical aspects of the teacher are important, are knowledge of content and instructional methods enough to understand what it means to be a subject teacher? Skilbeck and Connell (2003) used other factors to describe teacher effectiveness, some of which are more aesthetic in nature:

Effective teachers have attributes and qualities, which are a mixture of the personal and the professional; they are committed, creative, critical, purposive, knowledgeable professionals. Ethical, moral and spiritual values inform and colour their expertise. (p.iv)

These aesthetic dimensions of teaching play an important role in how a teacher situates themselves in relation to the subjects they are teaching. A framework is needed that enables examination of such attributes and qualities that also takes account of the specific task of subject teaching. The importance of these aesthetic dimensions emerged during a video study examining how teachers’ experiences of the mathematics and science subject cultures shaped their pedagogy (Darby, 2010). This paper proposes the use of a framework to analyse the relationships between knowledge of what and how to teach, and the subject-specific nature of teachers’ identities and passions. The analysis uses a Deweyan inspired framework, “Aesthetic Understanding” (Girod, Rau, & Schepige, 2003). I apply this framework on the premise that teaching, and knowing what and how to teach, involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. According to Zembylas (2005b), emotion and cognition are inextricably linked in the process of student learning. I assert that the same can be said for teachers in their development as subject teachers. “Aesthetics” provides a way of exploring the links between what teachers know about the subject, and their personal response to that knowledge. Therefore, this paper asks the question, how can an aesthetic-oriented lens help us understand teachers’ personal response to science and mathematics teaching and how this response can shape practice?

The following section describes the aesthetic framework as applied to this analysis.

## 2. An aesthetics framework

Aesthetics is often restricted to the affective domain, along with beliefs, values, attitudes, emotions and feelings, self-concept and identity (Schuck & Grootenboer, 2004). In the last twenty years

increasing attention has been given to the affective domain as researchers explore its centrality in the learning of mathematics (Bishop, 1991; Sinclair, 2004), learning of science (Alsop, Ibrahim, & Kurucz, 2006; Chandrasekhar, 1990; Zembylas, 2005b) and learning in general (Beijaard et al., 2004; Ivie, 1999; Pajares, 1992; Schwab, 1978; Zembylas, 2005a). This growing interest in affective issues in educational research acknowledges the personal dimensions of teaching and learning; however, aesthetics is less represented, particularly in relation to the teacher.

Strictly speaking, aesthetics addresses both the cognitive and affective aspects of human nature. Kant used the term “aesthetic” to apply to judgements of beauty about art and nature where beauty is essentialised in the object. In comparison, Dewey preferred to adopt the term “aesthetic experience”, signifying “experience as appreciative, perceiving and enjoying. It denotes the consumer’s rather than the producer’s standpoint” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 47). According to Dewey, beauty is therefore not perceived as an inherent quality of the object. The individual acts as agent in their perception of the experience, and this agency involves both cognitive and affective dimensions: “not absence of desire and thought but their thorough incorporation into perceptual experience characterises esthetic experience in its distinction from experiences that are especially ‘intellectual’ and ‘practical’” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 254). Dewey’s aesthetic integrates the mind and emotion so that the integrity of an experience is maintained. This is called aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934/1980). This paper uses a Deweyan perspective on aesthetics and aesthetic experience.

Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience helps to understand the relationship between the affective and the cognitive. Wickman (2006) explains that in an aesthetic experience the inner emotional world is continuous with the outer world, meaning that one cannot think of one without the other. The cognitive (factual, what is the case) cannot be conceived of without the normative (values, what ought to be) in an aesthetic experience (which is evaluative). In keeping with this epistemology, Girod et al. (2003) claim that “from the perspective of aesthetic understanding, science learning is something to be swept-up in, yielded to, and experienced. Learning in this way joins cognition, affect, and action in productive and powerful ways” (p. 575–576).

According to Dewey’s principle of the “experiential continuum” (Dewey, 1938, p. 33), there exists some kind of continuity in every experience. This means that

every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preferences and aversions, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end. Moreover, every experience influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had. (p. 37).

The framework of “Aesthetic Understanding” has the potential to provide insightful analysis of teachers’ personal response to the subject. “Aesthetic understanding is a rich network of conceptual knowledge combined with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of ideas that literally transform one’s experiences and perceptions of the world” (Girod et al., 2003, p. 578). Girod et al. (2003) draw from Dewey’s epistemology to describe aesthetic understanding as being comprised of three aspects: that it is “compelling and dramatic”, “unifying”, and “transformative” (p. 578).

The *compelling and dramatic nature of understanding* recognizes that aesthetic experiences are steeped in emotion. Aesthetic experience “...quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 104). Unification and coherence arises during an aesthetic experience because “it is not possible to divide in a vital

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