

## **Response Article: “We Gotta Get Out of this Place” – On the Distance between Learning and Education in the Sensory Curriculum**

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Walter Gershon’s essay provides a range of interesting observations on the sensory dimensions of curriculum. Through this he broadens the understanding of the role of sense making in education, thus bringing a wider set of phenomena to the attention of educators, educational researchers and theorists. Nonetheless there is one aspect of Gershon’s essay that puzzles me, and one aspect that intrigues me. Taken together they point in a slightly different direction than the one Gershon is pursuing in his essay. I offer this different direction not in order to refute what Gershon is putting forward, but rather in an attempt to expand his reflections in a way that, as I will suggest, might make it possible to show in a more explicit way where the *educational* potential of the sensory curriculum lie.

In what follows I make a case for keeping a distance between education and learning. With Gershon, I see learning as a process of sense-making, that is, of understanding and comprehending. If we look at the relationship between the student and the curriculum from this angle we could say that the main ‘task’ of the student indeed is to make sense of the

curriculum. But it is important that within the myriad of ways in which students can make sense of the curriculum, some ways of making sense make more sense, so to speak, than others. Here, then, is one important difference between education and learning – and one important reason, therefore to keep a distance between them – in that while learning can be an open, creative process, education always introduces the question which interpretation make sense, that is, the question which interpretations are considered to be valid, useful, socially sanctioned or personally meaningful. While the answer to this question is never simple or straightforward, the question is nonetheless an important one. The second reason why I highlight the important of keeping a distance between education and learning has to do with the fact that education is not only a process through which we engage with the world – for example, through making sense of it – it is also a process of emancipation from the world.

This double task of education – engagement and emancipation – not only refers to the world ‘outside’ of ourselves, but also refers to the relationship we develop with ourselves. While, on the one hand, education may play a role in ‘finding’ ourselves – that is, getting a sense of our feelings, desires and sense of self – there is also a need to introduce a distance between how we ‘find’ ourselves and how we can be and want to be with others. To exist in the world is never just a question of following our desires, but raises the more difficult question which of our desires are desirable, what it is, in other words, that we should desire. If we understand education just in terms of learning and learning just in terms of sense making there is a danger that we miss important educational opportunities for introducing a distance, and in what follows I will not only articulate in more detail how we should understand the distance between

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learning and education and why we should value it, but will also point at educational ways of keeping this distance open and giving it a (more) central place in our educational endeavours, one that focuses on the ways in which we are affected by what is ‘outside’ of us, rather than the ways in which we make sense of it. Let me turn, then, first to my puzzlement.

What puzzles me about Gershon’s essay, is that although he makes extensive use of the words ‘education and ‘educational’ – already in the second sentence he asks “How should this educational moment be understood?” – he never provides a clear description of his conception of education, nor of his conception of what makes something educational. As a result he seems to rely on an assumption that permeates much contemporary research, policy and practice, which is the idea that education is a matter of *learning* (see Biesta 2004; 2006; 2007). This is indeed how I read the main ‘message’ of Gershon’s essay, in that he understands learning as a process of sense making, and that, against conceptions of sense making that focus exclusively on conscious signification, he makes a case for a much wider range of ways in which we make sense and construct meaning. That is why sense making involves sensation, perception and signification; why it has intentional and unintentional dimensions; why it is aesthetic, social and political; why it is not just located in the mind but thoroughly embodied; and why sense making is therefore not just a matter of knowing or even experiencing, but also a matter of being. I have no problem with Gershon’s suggestion that sense making involves much more than conscious signification, and agree that to have the much broader notion of sense making that he puts forward is useful in order to get a greater awareness of the many dimensions that are at stake when sense making occurs in educational settings such as schools, colleges, or universities. And while I do think that a broader notion of sense making can change our understanding of learning, I do not

think that it can, in itself, get us any closer to the educational questions we, as educators, educational researchers and educational theoreticians, should be asking. Put more strongly: I even think that the focus on sense making can distract us from asking those questions and thus such a focus runs the risk of being unhelpful rather than helpful in the context of education and curriculum. Let me explain what I have in mind and where my concerns stem from.

Perhaps the quickest way to highlight the distance between learning and education – or for that matter the distance between sense making and education – is that learning and sense making can happen anywhere and at any time, whereas education always raises the question what kind of sense we are making and ought to make, that is, what kind of learning should happen. Unlike learning and sense making, education inevitably raises the normative question about what good, meaningful or worthwhile learning and sense making are about, and it raises this question in two ways. One can be called analytical and has to do with our evaluation of the processes of sense making and learning that actually go on in our educational institutions – and here a long tradition of critical work has exposed how educational learning and sense making may constrain and confine us, rather than that they provide opportunities for expansion and emancipation. But there is also a programmatic ‘version’ of the normative question where we ask what should be learned in and through education – often expressed in terms of the curricular questions about what should be learned, how should it be learned, and most importantly, for what reasons and with regard to which purposes should it be learned. Of course, such questions are never easy or straightforward, but they nonetheless pose themselves each time we invest time, effort and resources in setting up educational environments and arrangements that seek to provide very specific opportunities for learning

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and making sense. The distance between education and learning is there, therefore, because not any sense making automatically ‘makes sense.’

While Gershon provides detailed descriptions of the manifold ways in which the students in his project made sense, he says very little about what they made sense *of*. Yet the latter question is a crucial one as well. Philosophically we could already say that sense making always has an object – we never make sense in the abstract but there is always something we make sense *of*. Yet educationally the important point is that not any way in which students make sense of what is offered them in education is equally valid. While, again, I am not advocating an authoritarian conception of education where students simply need to swallow what teachers provide them with, this is not an argument for the very opposite side of the spectrum where students’ sense making takes place without any limits. The fact that the students in Gershon’s project are making sense of science – and note that the word itself is used in the essay without much elaboration or critical scrutiny – means that the educational challenge is not one of just making any sense of science, and particularly not any sense that may just make them feel good about their sense making. Science, after all, is not everything, which means that the educational challenge in making sense of science is to figure out what the boundaries of the object of sense making are. The aim of sense making in the context of science education, so we might say, is that students make the *right* sense (without suggesting, of course, that there is only one right way in which sense can be made of science – a question that already starts with making sense of the very word ‘science’). By saying so little about the object of sense making, and perhaps also by providing students with little access to the boundaries and possibilities of sense making of science, there is therefore already a danger that the particular way in which the sense making task is being

presented to the students reinforces stereotypical ways of understanding what science is – note, for example, the use of lab coats or the reference to ‘the scientific process.’

And this is where a further distance between learning and sense making on the one hand and education on the other matters, in that education is precisely ‘there,’ so I wish to suggest, in order to create such a distance. One way to read the word ‘education’ is precisely as a process of leading out (*ex-ducere*), just as the word ‘pedagogy’ refers to the pedagogue, the slave who brought the children to school – which, metaphorically is an act of leading children out of their ‘home,’ out of the place where they are with themselves, to a ‘worldly’ place that takes them beyond where they are, and hence also beyond who they are. While education is not a ‘pure’ process of leading out – after all, if that was all that education was about it would run the risk of becoming a process of indoctrination in which the self is destroyed – it is also not a process of just confirming the self as it is. This means that education is also never just a matter of student expression (which is the one-sided idea of a 100% child-centred education that Dewey rightly was critical of). Education stands for the double task of engaging the child with the world and emancipating the child from the world, as the French educationalist Philip Meirieu has put it (see Meirieu 2007) which, so I wish to suggest, that education also stands for the double task of engaging children and students with themselves and emancipating children and students from themselves. The latter point is educationally important as well, particularly to counter trends that suggest that as long as students are happy or are having fun, education is doing a proper job. I believe that this is a dangerous suggestion, because happiness and fun keep children and students ‘tied’ to their existing desires – in a sense happiness and fun reinforce such desires – rather than that they are put in a position where their desires are questioned, so that they can

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engage in the difficult but crucial question which of their desires can be considered to be desirable. And this question has become even more important in an age of global and all-encompassing capitalism, as capitalism precisely ‘works’ through a multiplication and intensification of our desires – so that ultimately we want to buy more ‘stuff’ – rather than that it summons us to examine our desires.

In Gershon’s analysis of his empirical material I see too much focus on sense making, and too little attention to the question what the object of sense making is and in what ways this object puts boundaries on the ways in which it can be made sense of. Similarly I see too much focus on students’ ‘investment’ in the sense making process – that is in how it connects with their *existing* desires – rather than that it allows for the creation of a critical distance between what they desire, with what at first sight ‘feels good,’ and with what a desirable mode of engagement with their object of sense making should be (leaving aside for the moment the even more complex question of how their initial desires have been constructed in the first place). And I see a similar limitation in the way in which Gershon theorizes the possibilities of the sensual curriculum as for me the educational question is not about resonance as such, but about what it is we should be resonating with and where we should actually refuse to resonate with, and where dissonance – either with the object of sense making or with ourselves – would be the more desirable option, both individually and collectively-politically. That is why I would even make a more positive case for the fact that not everything that happens in the classroom, and not everything that students bring to the classroom is *automatically* relevant. The educational question for me is precisely about making the distinction between what is relevant and what is not relevant, which means that from that angle we can never say *in a general sense* whether how students prefer to sit, prefer to pay attention, prefer to think, prefer to

engage or disengage is relevant or irrelevant from the perspective of their education. (After all, such preferences are to be seen as articulations of their desires, and for that reason should never be simply accepted ‘as they come’ but always be opened for critical scrutiny.)

All this leads me to the observation that education is not just an act of confirmation of what is already ‘there,’ but is also an interruption (see Biesta 2006). Education is, to use the words of Levinas, not simply a matter of my being – as it is – but also of my being-in-question, that is, the way in which I exist, in the literal sense of standing outside of myself, in my engagement with the world as an object that stands outside of me, rather than only a construct of my own sense making. It is precisely in relation to this that a further limitation of sense making comes into view, in that sense making is only one particular way of being, and not necessarily the most desirable one. Gershon writes that “(m)aking sense is how people understand their worlds – their relationships to local and less local ecologies, others, and themselves”. While I agree with this, it does not mean, however, that making sense is therefore the only way in which people can live their lives, or the only way in which they can give form to their relationships to local and less local ecologies, others, and themselves. Sense making is an act of comprehension, where I ‘grasp’ the world in an act of understanding. Sense making thus puts me in a very particular relationship towards the world, one that starts with the ‘I’ and that makes the world into an object of my sense making – the question, after all, is how *I* can make sense, how *I* can understand, how *I* can comprehend – rather than that it allows for the world to speak to me, to put it briefly. Here we encounter the limits of what might be called the ‘hermeneutical worldview,’ one that always puts the self before the world, and envisages the relationship between the two entirely in terms of me making sense of, rather than as a relationship where what is other speaks to me.

These questions move us into much more complex philosophical waters, and I do not have the space to go there (for a first attempt see Biesta 2013). Nonetheless, they are important in the context of Gershon's essay because of brief remark that, in a sense, is at odds with the main thrust of the essay – and it is this brief remark that is the source of what intrigued me and what, I think, opens up a very different direction for the sensual curriculum. The brief remark is to be found in a sentence quotes from Greeg and Weigworth who write that the question of affect is not only about the body's capacity to affect but also the body's capacity *to be affected*. Being affected, so I wish to suggest, precisely points at an existential possibility that is the very opposite of hermeneutics, the opposite of thinking of our lives entirely as acts of sense making, of grasping, understanding and comprehension. To be affected hints at the experience where something speaks to you, where something comes to you from the outside, where something addresses you *beyond* what already makes sense (which means that it can only appear as non-sense or beyond reason). Being affected can therefore seen as an experience of 'being taught' that is the very opposite of the act of 'learning from' (on this distinction see Biesta in press). It is here that I feel that we encounter a very different direction for the sensual curriculum, one where the sensual curriculum does not bind us to our desires, to the acts of sense making that already make sense – so that they never take us into what does not yet make sense, that is beyond our current reason – but where it has a possibility to emancipate, to draw us out into the world, to draw us out of ourselves, into existence in the literal sense of the word. This hints at a sensual curriculum that does not focus on sense making but is rather interested in the encounter with non-sense, with the very thing that is beyond what currently makes sense. Such a curriculum might be better suited to do educational work rather than keep education in the domain of

learning. Gershon's essay points to this possibility as well, but only at its very margins, and perhaps at a point where the sense of the essay itself is put at stake. Yet it is this possibility that for me is educationally the more urgent one, which is why I wish to offer this as a different direction for the sensual curriculum.<sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] In his paper Gershon uses the word 'otological,' which is actually quite relevant for my response, as what I am trying to argue for could perhaps be termed as an 'otological' reading of the sensual curriculum, one that focuses on the ear as a sense organ of receptivity rather than construction (see also Derrida 1988)

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