



Using the contemplative teaching method to enhance the awareness of the aesthetic experience of second-year students majoring in early childhood

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the effects of using contemplative teaching to enhance the awareness of the aesthetic experience of second-year students majoring in early childhood education. The sample consisted of 17 students enrolled in the course 2717213 Arts, Music, and Movement for the Young Children, offered in the second semester of the 2015 academic year. The research design was the BABA approach, comprising four phases: the first treatment period (B_1) using the contemplative teaching method; the first baseline period (A_1) using the lecturing method; the second treatment period (B_2) using the contemplative teaching method; and the second baseline period (A_2) using the lecturing method. Eleven lesson plans, each of which lasted 3 h were designed and executed. There were three sets of research tools—an evaluation form of aesthetic experience awareness, an evaluation form of course content and a semi-structured interview form. The students were asked to do the first two sets before, between, and after the experiment, while the interview form was carried out at the end of the experiment. The quantitative data were analyzed using the mean, standard deviation, percentage, and a matched paired t-test. The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings were as follows:

- 1) After the experiment, the students' mean score of aesthetic experience awareness and their mean score of aesthetic experience concepts were higher with a statistical significance of .01;
- 2) The students agreed that there were three learning outcomes—attitude toward young children, attitude toward themselves, and attitude toward aesthetic experience.

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Introduction

Awareness and knowledge about aesthetic experience play an important role for teachers in early childhood programs in designing learning experiences and the learning environment to enhance the learning of pre-school-age children. Early childhood teachers that realize the importance of aesthetic experience can contribute to the development of young children's aesthetic experience by strengthening the students' approaches to beholding, hearing, feeling, and moving as well as other possibilities suitable for the learning management for these children (Lim, 2005). Aesthetics plays an important role in human development and it involves both natural and human-made beauty that can be appreciated through the five senses and 'the heart'. Feeney and Moravcik (1987) said that aesthetics involved the capacity to perceive, respond, and be sensitive to both the natural environment and human creations. Aesthetic experience is regarded as an expression of personal taste. Since the capacity of sensory experience is a fundamental human characteristic, early age is important in nurturing the aesthetic sense and other areas of development such as language and intellectual facility.

The four aesthetic experiences are joy, liveliness, meaningfulness, and the value of a quality work of art (Schustertermar, 1997 as cited in Lim, 2005). These characteristics are experienced through the five senses leading to the awareness and appreciation of beauty experienced by an individual. Young children have to be exposed to this sensory experience and the development of aesthetic experience is not a linear line or via a hierarchical level. Rather, it is a dynamic and unique experience for each child and it cannot be imposed. Early childhood teachers, therefore, should learn about aesthetic concepts and experience along with early-age learning development so that they can design courses related to aesthetic experience to promote young children's learning (Lim, 2005).

Early childhood teachers should have a chance to reflect themselves in the community of learning that embraces generosity; consequently, they realize that they are a guide and have to design the necessary learning experiences for young children. Self-reflection is a part of learning that can be materialized through effective intellectual activities so participants can share their learning experience and eventually they will understand the value of self-reflection, leading to new insights into their beliefs and conduct (Jones, Jenkin, & Loard, 2006) since with self-reflection activities, participants can review their thoughts and experiences thoroughly and they can realize their students' needs and desires as well as appropriate approaches to their students (Stremmel, 2005).

Contemplative education is the process of learning where the end product is the development of self-transformative learning so that students can deeply understand themselves, others, and things around them. With this understanding, they will become compassionate, modest, and altruistic (Nilchaikovit, 2008). They will refine their attitudes from being self-centered to open-mindedness, compassion, and openness to alternatives. There are many contemplative approaches but in this

research, the 4-3-3+1 approach was adopted since it is process-oriented. The process involves attentive listening, aesthetic conversation, learning reflection, and relaxation (Khayankij, 2015). The key element of the contemplative approach is the contemplation of experiences that lead to insights into the self, others, and the world.

The course 2717213 Arts, Music, and Movement for the Young Children, offered in the second semester for second-year undergraduate students majoring in early childhood education, was first offered in 2014. The researcher wanted to explore ways of learning management that could lead the students majoring in early childhood education to understand the importance of aesthetic experience that involves the appreciation of natural beauty and works of art such as visual art, music, movement, and drama by adopting a contemplative teaching method focusing on attentive listening, dialogue, and learning reflection. The students, therefore, can design aesthetic experiences that promote learning among those of pre-school ages.

Objective

To examine the effects of using contemplative teaching to enhance the awareness of the aesthetic experience of second-year students majoring in early childhood education.

Methodology

This was a classroom action research and the participants were 17 second-year students majoring in early childhood education enrolled in the course 2717213 Arts, Music, and Movement for the Young Children, offered in the second semester of the academic year 2015. All of them were female aged between 19 and 20.

The teaching and learning process of this course was designed according to the backward design. The design was divided into four phases: the first treatment period (B_1) using the contemplative teaching method; the first baseline period (A_1) using the lecturing method; the second treatment period (B_2) using the contemplative teaching method; and the second baseline period (A_2) using the lecturing method. Eleven lesson plans, each of which lasted 3 h, were designed with the details as follows:

1. The contemplative teaching method integrated content and learning through the contemplation practice consisting of three steps and was divided into six lesson plans as follows:

Step 1: Relaxation. The purpose was to prepare students for the class by making them feel relaxed and calm. The atmosphere had to be pleasant. There were two learning activities in this step:

1) Classroom preparation: Two volunteers were asked to arrange the learning space in the center of the room and place the learning tools required for each week, such as color pencils, crayons, color chalk, magic pens, paper, or cloth.

2) Readiness preparation: The purpose was to get the students to concentrate so that they were ready for

the learning. They were asked to express their feelings and thoughts before learning orally or they could sing in a chorus to encourage themselves spiritually.

Step 2: Learning through contemplation practice: The students were taught the concepts of the course through activities focusing on the body through body movement, the mind through the awareness of feelings of themselves and their classmates, and the 'head' through the awareness of thoughts that occurred while doing the activities. The learning activities included:

- 1) Revision of experiences: The purpose was to look at experiences and memory in retrospect about the concepts taught in the last class.
- 2) Doing art activities: The purpose was to do works of art that were in line with the course concepts such as singing, painting, and dancing.
- 3) Learning reflection: The purpose was to let the participants look inward through being calm, being still, and reviewing one's emotions, feelings, and new thoughts that emerged while doing the activities. At this stage, students had an opportunity to practice listening without judgment.

Step 3: Journal writing. The purpose was to recount the learning experience in each lesson in writing. The writing included the students' thoughts, emotions, and feelings.

2. The lecturing method was to explain the course content and concepts and to ask questions. This method consisted of two steps divided into six lesson plans as follows:

Step 1: Content learning: The purpose was to review the content taught in the last class and present the new content.

Step 2: Journal writing: The purpose was to recount the learning experience in each lesson in writing. The writing included the students' thoughts, emotions, and feelings.

There were three sets of research tools as follows:

- 1) An evaluation form of aesthetic experience awareness with a 5-scale inventory consisting of 30 questions divided into two components—20 items related to concepts of aesthetic experience and 10 items related to awareness of one's role. In addition, there was one open-ended question. The validity of this form was between 0.6 and 1.0, and its reliability was 0.74.
- 2) An evaluation form of course content was in the form of writing answers consisting of eight items. Each item was worth a score of up to 5 totaling 40 marks. The validity of this form was between 0.6 and 1.0, and its reliability was 0.89.
- 3) A semi-structured interview form was used in conjunction with the quantitative data. It contained four questions: a) What do you think about the atmosphere of the class? b) Have you noticed any changes in your aesthetic experience? If so, how and can you provide an example?

c) What do you like and dislike about this course? d) What are the learning outcomes of this course? The validity of this form was between 0.6 and 1.0.

The students were asked to do both evaluation forms before, during, and after the experiment. The interviews took place at the end of the experiment. The data were analyzed as follows:

- 1) The quantitative data were analyzed using the mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (SD). The mean score of the first evaluation was compared with that of the last evaluation and the matched paired t-test was used to analyze the data during each phase of the experiment using a line graph. A computer program was used to determine the value of development during each phase.
- 2) The qualitative data were appraised using content analysis to analyze the transcribed scripts. The results were matched with the students' journals and the researcher's after-class journals.

Results

The results were divided into two parts: quantitative data and qualitative data as follows:

Quantitative Data

At the end of the experiment, the mean score of the participants' awareness of aesthetic experience was higher and the mean score of their concepts of aesthetic experience was also higher with a statistical significance of .01 as shown in [Table 1](#).

Awareness of Aesthetic Experience

The mean score before the experiment was 3.96 and in the first treatment period (B_1) 3.89, but it was 4.10 in the first baseline period (A_1), and it increased to 4.26 and 4.40 in the second treatment period (B_2) and the second baseline period (A_2), respectively ([Figure 1](#)).

Concepts of Aesthetic Experience

The average percentage of providing the correct answers in the first treatment period (B_1) was 11.03, in the first baseline period (A_1) 33.45, in the second treatment period (B_2) 15.96, and in the second baseline period (A_2) 55.87. When the average percentages of the four periods were compared, it was found that in the first baseline

Table 1

Difference between the mean scores of the awareness of aesthetic experience and those of the concepts of aesthetic experience before and after the experiment

Component	Phase	N	\bar{x}	S.D.	t-test	p
Awareness of aesthetic experience	Pre	17	3.96	0.28	4.90	.000
	Post	17	4.40	0.27		
Concepts of aesthetic experience	Pre	17	4.41	1.33	14.41	.000
	Post	17	23.00	5.03		

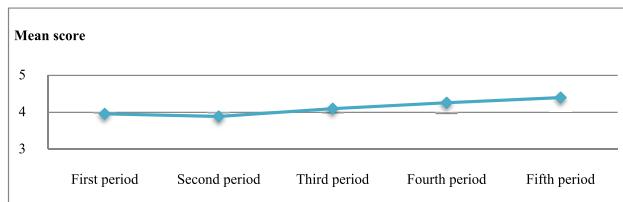


Figure 1 Mean score of awareness of aesthetic experience in each period of experiment

period (A_1), the average percentage of providing the correct answers was higher than the first treatment period (B_1). In the second treatment period (B_2), it was lower, but higher in the second baseline period (A_2). This indicated that the participants understood the concepts of aesthetic experience when they were taught with the lecturing method better than with the contemplative teaching method as shown in Figure 2.

The participants' development of knowledge in each period was also analyzed by looking at the similarities of the line graph in each period. The participants could be classified into three groups. The first was the quick responding participants, the second the medium responding participants, and the third the slow responding participants.

The First Group: The Quick Responding Participants. They responded well. In the first baseline period (A_1), their percentage of development was between 37.33 and 59.9, but in the second treatment period (B_2), their percentage of development was lower (between –30.50 and –45.64). However, their percentage of development in the second baseline period (A_2) was higher (73.65–37.40), which was higher than that in the first treatment period (B_1) as shown in Figure 3.

The Second Group: Medium Responding Participants. They responded quite well. In the first baseline period (A_1), their percentage of development was between 17.35 and 27.38,

but in the second treatment period (B_2), their percentage of development was lower (between –17.85 and –30.30), which was about the same as that in the first treatment period (B_1). However, their percentage of development in the second baseline period (A_2) was higher (71.13–35.00), which was higher than that in the first treatment period (B_1) as shown in Figure 4.

The Third Group: Slow Responding Participants. They did not respond well. In the first baseline period (A_1), their percentage of development was between 6.05 and 17.40 and in the second treatment period (B_2), their percentage of development was a little lower (between –0.10 and –21.41). However, their percentage of development in the second baseline period (A_2) was higher (52.43–22.38), which was higher than that in the first treatment period (B_1) as shown in Figure 5.

Qualitative Data

The data comprised two aspects as follows:

Learning Atmosphere

The participants pointed out that the atmosphere was relaxing and friendly. They had the chance to help arrange the learning environment. They liked to sit in a semicircle because they could see everyone in the room. This was a way to control the learning behavior. They paid more

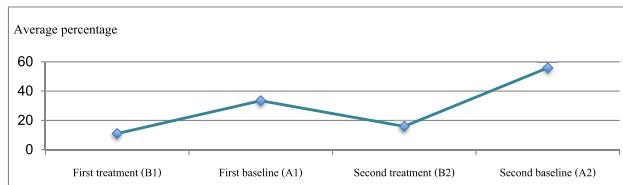


Figure 2 Average percentages of providing correct answers in each period of experiment

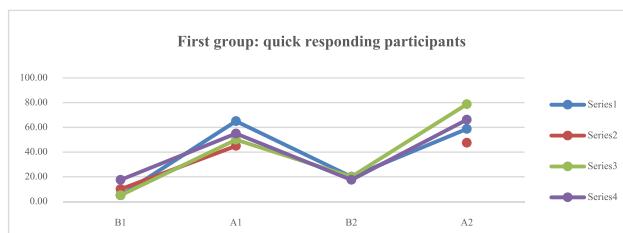


Figure 3 Average percentage of first group providing correct answers in each period of experiment

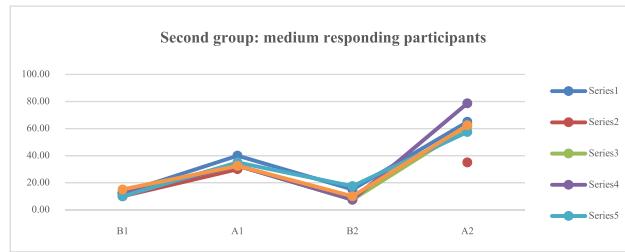


Figure 4 Average percentage of second group providing correct answers in each period of experiment

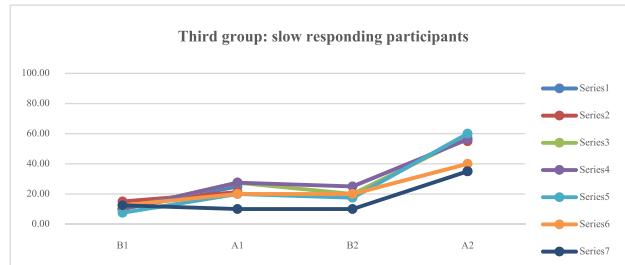


Figure 5 Average percentage of third group providing correct answers in each period of experiment

attention to the class and the alternation of contemplative teaching method and the lecturing method complemented each other. They could learn without realizing that they were in a classroom situation. They could gain knowledge and the awareness of their emotions. The activities they liked were readiness exploration, learning reflection, and the revision of previous lessons.

The participants agreed that the teacher played an important role in the awareness of aesthetic experience because she was open-minded and attentive. In addition, she asked open-ended questions and this encouraged them to express their opinions. This made them alert and eager to participate more in the lesson. The teacher also valued and felt that what she was teaching was worthwhile and the participants could sense that. The participants learned by embracing the content through the teacher.

Learning Outcomes

There were three learning outcomes: attitude toward young children, attitude toward the self, and attitude toward aesthetic experience.

The participants changed their attitude toward young children after the experiment. They said that they respected young children's opinions, viewed them as humans, and appreciated them. This attitude made them treat young children better. The participants became more attentive, observant, and open-minded. They did not underestimate children's work. They realized that children were happy while doing the artwork or singing. Consequently, teachers have to think carefully before teaching.

Regarding attitude toward the self, they were more aware of beauty. This changed their behavior. They became more gentle and paid attention to the beautiful things around them. They wore more decent clothing and concentrated more on what they were doing.

Regarding attitude toward aesthetic experience, they gained knowledge and understanding about aesthetic experience designed for young children, teaching techniques, ways to design activities, and selection of natural media. They realized that aesthetic experience was an important element in the development of young children. They also paid more attention to the beauty around them.

Discussions and Recommendations

The issues to be discussed were as follows:

Integration of Contemplative Teaching Method with Lecturing Method to Enhance Students' Awareness of Aesthetic Experience

At the end of the experiment, the mean score of the participants' awareness of aesthetic experience and that of their concepts of aesthetic experience were higher with a statistical significance of .01. The mean score of the participants' awareness of aesthetic experience was low in the first period of using the contemplative teaching method but later it went higher and higher until the end of the teaching. However, the mean score of their concepts of aesthetic experience was high only during the period of using the lecturing method. It can be concluded that the contemplative teaching method is a more suitable approach to enhance the awareness of aesthetic experience than to improve insights into the concepts of aesthetic experience. This might be because the participants are not familiar with active learning, which does not focus on the content. In addition, the seating was set in a semicircle so every participant could see each other and this changed the atmosphere of the classroom. At the beginning of the semester, the participants had to spend some time adjusting

themselves to the classroom environment and the teaching methods.

The contemplative teaching method is an experiential learning process in which students have to experience what they are learning with mindfulness so that they can understand the real meaning of that experience (Khayankij, 2015). In addition to the new atmosphere and teaching methods, contemplation is a key element of the contemplative teaching method. Students have to explore themselves deeply and consciously not only through meditation (Montgomery & Walker, 2012). In this experiment, the participants had never used meditation as a tool to make an experience meaningful so their reflections on what they had learned were not effective during the first part of the experiment. At the beginning of the class, the researcher had to give the rationale for selecting this teaching method and outline on how to reflect what they had learned. From time to time, the researcher had to ask questions so that the participants could practice their contemplation skill to realize that what they did was meaningful. Providing a chance for students to explore their learning experience leads to appreciation and new realization (Jones et al., 2006). It was found that the participants understood the lessons well and the feedback could increase their awareness. Students can consider their experience by expressing their opinions and feelings (Siegel, 2016). Perez (2011) noted that meditation was important for the development of awareness and present orientation. Writing a journal about their emotions, feelings, and thoughts is also vital for the development of this aspect.

At first, the participants needed some time to adjust themselves to the teaching methods and to learn to embrace the new learning experience. This is in line with Shapiro et al. (2014), who said that the contemplative approach depended on an inquisitive mind and openness. If the teacher is doubtful about the outcomes of this approach, the teacher cannot truly reap the benefits from an activity. Although the contemplative teaching method can promote the awareness of aesthetic experience, if it is integrated with the lecturing method, it can better satisfy the learners' needs and the learning outcomes based on the contemplative teaching method can be obtained sooner. The research findings revealed that the participants were satisfied with both teaching methods because the contemplative teaching method made them sense the kindergarten children's feelings. The learning atmosphere was relaxing and happy and the participants felt free to express their feelings or opinions. This was different from the atmosphere in the lecture room. However, the lecturing method made them understand the content and the main ideas of the lessons better although sometimes they felt tired or bored. Understanding the content and the importance of aesthetic experience toward the pre-school age gained from the lectures and having a direct experience in participating in aesthetic activities made them realize the connection between theory and practice. They, therefore, were aware of the value and the importance of aesthetic experience.

Teaching and learning management according to the contemplative approach takes time in creating an atmosphere in an environment that promotes the informal exchange of ideas, emotions, and feelings; as a result, there

should be a point where conventional teaching and learning management can meet with contemplative teaching and learning management so that there will be a gradual change in the teaching and learning management; consequently, students will not feel that they are abruptly forced out of their comfort zone. An integration of the contemplative teaching method and lecturing method is suitable for the first-year and second-year students because they are not familiar with active learning, learning reflection, and expression of their ideas in front of a big group of students.

Contemplative Learning Requires Cultivation, Open-Mindedness and Trust

Contemplative learning is a learning process through intuition and feelings leading to thinking and action. There are four underlying concepts of this learning—respect for humanity, openness to alternatives, trust in holism, and the belief that learning comes from inside and not from outside (the teacher). The teacher is a facilitator providing students with appropriate activities, but students have to realize how meaningful these activities are by themselves (Khayankij, 2015). The participants agreed that the classroom atmosphere was relaxing and comfortable. Everyone listened with open-hearted attention and the hands-on experience made them appreciate the aesthetic experience and they could sense those feelings from the teacher. According to Shapiro et al. (2014), the teacher has to have faith in the contemplative teaching method and carefully select activities to meet the students' needs; as a result, in the current study, both teacher and students had positive feelings. Uhrmacher, Moroye, and Conrad (2016) said that the teacher could foster aesthetic experience among students by arranging the classroom in a way that could motivate students to further explore the aesthetic experience. With this, students majoring in early childhood education can cultivate aesthetic experience in their pre-school students in the future (Dehouske, 2006).

Awareness of Aesthetic Experience Leads to Self-Transformation

The participants agreed that they liked this teaching method, particularly, the readiness preparation and learning reflection because they could spend some time looking inward and listening to others' opinions. This helped them gain insights from inside. Khayankij (2015) noted that the learning outcomes of this teaching method were concentration and wisdom leading to understanding and transforming the self. Then there was inner growth and the seeds of appreciation slowly grew from inside. The students expressed their appreciation by paying more attention to the way they lived their lives and they fostered positive attitudes toward themselves and children. Early childhood teachers are soul protectors in that they have nurtured imagination, curiosity, love of life, and love of young children's learning. At the same time, they have to improve themselves and take good care of their own perception of aesthetic experience (Mayesky, 2003). Contemplative conduct requires concentration and openness without criticism and this will create a connection between fact, virtue, and beauty. Zajonc (2013) said that

concentration can connect the self with virtue. For example, we would no longer be self-centered. We would become a mode of gentleness and have empathy and openness to the real world. This was a connection from inside with outside or tacit knowledge with the knowledge of the world. Those who follow the contemplative approach can refine themselves in terms of knowledge, understanding, and appreciation.

Aesthetic experience is crucial in developing human beings. In the words of [James \(2006\)](#), art is an awakener of consciousness and a humanizer of society. Using the arts as learning tools in terms of developing young children can promote the ability to understand and form their own view point of science and technology. Artistic activities enable the development of observation and intuitive thinking which lead to moments of self-discovery, self-knowledge, and the overcoming of difficulties. Therefore, artistic activity is important for human development in terms of developing potential, consciousness, and freedom ([Schleider & Stoltz, 2014](#)). In higher education, integrating art in the course cultivates responsibility for one's decisions and actions toward oneself and the whole universe ([Kolstad, 2016](#)).

The aesthetic experience cannot be forced upon an individual, but the conditions can be set up to provide the opportunity. It is an experience intertwined with happiness, joyfulness, heightened vitality, attentiveness, being in the moment, and can lead to a “wow” experience ([Uhrmacher et al., 2016](#)). A happy teacher who values aesthetic experience will create a positive atmosphere in the classroom as well as creative teaching methods which is a means of professional development ([Chen, 2014](#); [Lim, 2005](#)). Early childhood student teachers need to be taught about aesthetic education and arts appreciation for young children in order to improve the latter's aesthetic literacy and practice ([Chen, 2014](#)).

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Research should be carried out on the development of teaching and learning management that is suitable for the learning nature of second-year students who are not familiar with active learning. The research design can begin with the lecturing method followed by the contemplative teaching method
2. Research is required on assessment of the learning of these students to follow up their self-learning progress periodically to develop their contemplation capacity and to improve their learning.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

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