

Imagining the Education of Others: Alanna Williams' Teaching Philosophy

I love going to school: education offers a never-ending opportunity to learn about new ideas and to meet new people, so I became a teacher. Before that I was an interactive, digital media designer and developer. There is a synergy between these two—as I've learned how to better teach interaction design to others, my teaching has also improved. Teaching and digital media design both deal with making decisions on behalf of others, utilizing different knowledge domains that interact within a changing, complex environment. Designing for others requires critical thinking, imagination, and a reflective, aesthetic judgment, which can only be developed through experience and *deep learning*. VIU's website describes deep learning as the "genuine understanding and long-term retention of learning material and ability to retrieve and apply it to unfamiliar concepts."¹ This fits with my understanding of deep learning as education that is personal, progressive, and emphasizes contextualized meaning over fixed truth. Today's complex and fast-changing world demands this kind of continuous learning. My aim is to educate in a way that respects the plurality and diversity of my students, and their freedom to begin something new. This requires the continued development of an aesthetic judgment for both my students and myself; we are always learning together.

I owe much of my understanding of deep learning to Hannah Arendt's repurposing of Immanuel Kant's reflective judgment and imagination for moral and political actors. Judgment is the "mysterious endowment of the mind by which the general, always a mental construction, and the particular, always given to sense experience, are brought together," thus providing the link between theory and practice.² Kant articulated two notions of judgment: reflective judgment, which derives the rule from the particular, and determinant judgment, which subsumes particulars under a general rule.³ Reflective, aesthetic judgment is other-directed and discriminatory: it is how we decide what is right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, particularly in relation to our actions with others. Arendt, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and later wondered if evil was connected to thinking (or lack thereof), recognized in Kant's aesthetic judgment the

¹ VIU, Provost Awards for Excellence in Teaching Design and Practice, accessed January 30, 2017, <https://www2.viu.ca/pvpa/ProvostAwardsforExcellenceinTeachingDesignandPractice.asp>

² Hannah Arendt, *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 69.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

potential for “judging without bannisters” during unprecedented times when no rule exists by which to guide thought and action. In these challenging times, only aesthetic judgment is capable of developing a new standard, which it does through the use of outstanding *particular* examples. These aesthetic judgments achieve “exemplary validity” when an outstanding example “in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined.”⁴ Aesthetic judgments also achieve validity by being communicated in general terms to others in order to woo their consent, which requires an enlarged mentality and imagination. “One can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands.”⁵ Much of my teaching is designed to provide students with an opportunity to develop their aesthetic judgment by training their visiting imagination through first-hand experience with an issue or idea, critically reflecting on that experience from different perspectives, and then sharing their judgments, or opinions, with others. Listening to others’ opinions helps students develop their critical thinking in the form of an enlarged mentality that guides good judgment. Kant named this faculty *sensus communus*, or community sense. Engaging one’s *sensus communus* through reflection and imagination provides the necessary distance, or impartiality, to overcome the limitations of private, subjective conditions and circumstances. My teaching aims to develop all of our community sense through education that “expands intellectual horizons, sharpens minds, and enlarges capacity for thought and reflection”⁶ in the hope that we all develop the capacity to think deeply about our actions and judgments in a world full of diverse others.

⁴ Arendt, *LKPP*, p. 77.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 74.

⁶ Ken Osborne. "Education and Schooling: A Relationship That Can Never Be Taken For Granted," in *Why do we educate?: renewing the conversation*, by David L. Coulter, John R. Wiens, and Gary D. Fenstermacher (Malden (Massachusetts): NSSE, 2008), p. 27.