

Introduction

During the previous eleven years the Scandinavian associations of parents of children with congenital deafblindness (cdb) have organised so called "sommerhøjskoler" (summer camps/courses in the folk high school tradition) with aesthetic activities. A group of parents, called "Kulturförbundet", have invited artists and musicians to conduct courses and workshops for deafblind adults and their partners (parents, teachers, and other staff) from all of Scandinavia. These one-week courses have in recent years taken place on Gotland in Sweden, in Sømådalen in Norway, and at Slettestrand in Denmark.

This paper is based on a workshop presentation at the seventh European DbI Conference in Senegallia, Italy. At the workshop we presented an extract from an ongoing project, that aim at documenting the positive outcome of these summer camps in terms of communication and social interaction between the adults with cdb and their partners.

The project is initiated by the parents' associations in the Scandinavian countries, and is carried out in a collaboration between

- Kulturförbundet (The Nordic Cultural Association for CDb)
- Nordens Velfærdscenter (NVC) - Staff training for the Nordic deafblind services (former NUD)
- Videnscenter for døvblindfødt, Denmark (The Danish Resource Centre on CDb)
- Nationellt kunnskapscenter för dövblindfrågor, Sweden (The Swedish Resource Center on Deafblindness)
- Eikholt senter, Norway (Eikholt National Resource Center for the Deafblind)

The authors of the present paper (and the workshop it builds upon) are the project group running the project. The following is based on our presentation notes for the workshop.

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Steen Raahauge
Kari Schjøll Brede

Editor's note, December 2010:

The main project itself is now finished. The full report, available in Scandinavian only, may be downloaded at:
www.nordicwelfare.org/KunstErNogetViGor



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Nordic Centre for
Welfare and Social Issues

Sharing artistic activities and
aesthetic experiences with adults
with congenital deafblindness -
A new perspective on more than
10 years of Scandinavian practice

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The history of Kulturforbundet for døvblindfødte

Trough the work with this documentation, we were allowed to look into historical documents, films and pictures, and to talk to persons who were engaged in the aesthetics work from the very beginning.



The pact of The Nordic Cultural Association, signed and sealed by several brush strokes on a wrap of paper.

Trough the work with this documentation, we were allowed to look into historical documents, films and pictures, and to talk to persons who were engaged in the aesthetics work from the very beginning. We found that the idea of artistic and aesthetic activities for persons with cdb grew several places in the Nordic countries at the same time. Strangely enough, several of the persons we talked to, mentioned this idea about artistic activities as their personal

“darling” – and all believed that the ideas started exactly within themselves.

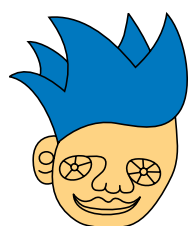
Probably everyone was right, but the ideas were never really fulfilled until a co-construction in 1994 when a Nordic conference about deafblindness took place in Tromsø, Norway. A Swedish sculpture artist presented her work with persons with acquired deafblindness. This made some enthusiastic parents to children with cdb and a

few creative teachers come together and agree that this could be possible also for their children.

So, the “lonely” ideas grew together, strengthened in the enthusiasm and the power of being a group. It resulted in an informal pact, sealed by several brush strokes and the signing on a wrap of paper, they also gave the pact a name: The Nordic Cultural Association.

The co-signers of this informal pact gave one of the teachers the task to invite to a meeting to work out the ideas into a plan, which she did at the Nordic Staff Training Centre for the Deafblind Services (NUD), Denmark, and she managed to collect a small but idealistic group.

Again the power of meeting face-to face was shown. When they met again in the 11th DbI World Conference in Argentina in 1995 with the topic “art and culture”, they managed to make concrete plans for the first course. This course was held at the Swedish island of Gotland the following year.



Nordiskt kulturförbund för dövblindfödda

1.1 Nordic parents' association 1998

After four years of informal cooperation, Kulturförbundet – the Nordic Cultural association for Congenitally Deafblind – was established by Nordic parents. The Association is headed by a board consisting of 2 representatives

from each of the Nordic Parents Associations, collaborating with practising artists and teachers.

The parents discussed from the very start the possibility to connect the association to the professional system. Both the administration of the courses and the financing of the courses were central questions. This is a big chapter by itself. You will not believe how many application forms are written, how many hours of hours of volunteer parent work have been spent. Unfortunately this is still an unsolved question.

1.2 Art, chaos and collaboration

From the early discussions and the founding papers from 1998, we can read the intentions about the aesthetic activities. The courses were named: “Art, chaos and collaboration”

In the early documents¹ we can see the first thoughts about these topics.

Art: at that time was without any fuss defined as “a language without words”.

Chaos: There was an idea that the chaotic (meaning: not strict and fixed situations), might influence the activity and relationship between the person with deafblindness and the partner in a positive manner.

Collaboration: The persons with deafblindness, parents and professionals had to be active and equal participants – according to their possibilities.

1 Flyer from The XII DbI World Conference Developing Through Relationships Portugal, Lisbon 20 to 25 July 1999, by Anne Grete Barlaug, Lone Pagioni, Karin Tiberg.

The aim was from the beginning – and still is – to offer cultural activities for congenitally deafblind adults from all the Nordic countries. They are given the possibilities to work with and develop their creative talents, thus giving them opportunity to learn, experience, express themselves and communicate with the outside world in a new and different way.

The association had the intention² that the courses should contain:

Quality: Each course is conducted by famous artists. The artist had to know his or her artistic profession very well, but also know principles of being a partner of a person with cdb.

Individuality: The artist in charge of the activities at the courses works out individual plans of action considering the needs and the qualifications of each participant.

Continuity: The courses are continuous, which gives the participants the possibility of artistic progress.

Options: It is possible to choose between various courses, for instance sculpture, painting, music, dance and drama. The teachers come from all the Nordic countries.

Locations: The courses will take place in all the Nordic countries.³

² Letter February 2nd 1998: Forslag til arbeidsgruppens møte i Kungälv 20-12 februari: KULTURVERKSAMHET FÖR VUXNA DÖVBLINDFÖDDA, Sven Sjöberg, Sweden. And the flyer in previous note.

³ In the pact from Tromsø 1994 Finland is represented. In the minutes from Nordisk Högskola 1996 pkt. 7 is stating that: We will contact Andrés Ragnarsson from Iceland and Jarnus Vesa from Anttihemmet, Finland, in order to also have participants from Iceland and Finland. Aila Öhman suggests in a letter from 2000 a Finish Culture experience in sauna. This was never brought to action.

Participations: Each class will consist of 6 persons with cdb.

Kulturforbundets ideas are still the same, but they have shown to extend in some ways: The number of participants is extended, last year 16 participants were expected in Sømådalén, Norway. More than 80 persons with deafblindness have participated in those courses, most of them have joined the courses again and again – some of the participants have been attending the courses 10 years in a row!

The status of the courses has changed and they are looked upon as an important contribution to each individual's possibility of development and quality of life – Not only during the courses, but also when they return to their everyday life.

The effect on education of the partners (parents/teachers/other partners) was mentioned in the early papers⁴ but was probably not expected with the outcome that it has shown to bring. The partners have given inspiration as one of the important outcomes in their evaluations following the courses.

Another effect is the change of awareness in the partners' manner of being together with the persons with deafblindness that can be observed during the courses. Other aspects that probably were hoped for but not expressively described, are the emergence of interest for new activities in the deafblind and the friendships that have occurred between some of them.

⁴ Letter of February 2nd, 1998 (as above).

Flemming Ask Larsen



Why this project?

We have good documentation of the beneficial effects of the courses. The aim of this project is to describe what has been done, and give our suggestions to why this actually works, and how.

2.1 Art? - Some common notions

A few widespread common-sense notions of art and aesthetics are, that they are fundamentally subjective; that they are closely related to taste and emotions; and that art and aesthetics are about things you cannot put to words.

In the light of these common sense notions, art and aesthetics are: Mysterious and inexplicable; everybody can have their own opinion about them; nobody are able to say anything sensible about them; and most of all, nobody can give objective judgments - or even agree on what criteria to use.

In this manner, the aesthetic experience becomes private, without theory, and beyond any possibility of generalisations. Everyone has his own taste, and his own opinion.

Another common notion is that art has to do with the pieces of fine art. These pieces of fine art have distinguished cultural value, which is felt as some kind of aura surrounding the art. It is part of this idea about art, that art objects are those that are chosen by the art institutions as being Art.

These ways of looking to art are at risk of limiting our work with art and aesthetics, because we tend to

understand working with art as being equal to producing pieces of (fine) art. This in turn means to produce objects that either *feels* like art or *looks* like art.

When you then come across something that doesn't look like or feel like art, two attitudes are often adapted. Either you can say: "My three-year-old child could make that - that's not art!" or you can adapt the more humble attitude and say: "Well, it is at a museum, therefore it must be art!".

These very normal attitudes toward art can have very negative consequences for working with art together with people with cdb. They represent a tendency to have a fixation on the *product* (the piece of art), and a fixation of the *normal* - What you produce has to look like or feel like art.

We would like to suggest another starting point than the common-sense one, when trying to describe what is going on. We would like to put some theory to the analysis, and expand on the notion of artistic activities and aesthetic experiences. A more theoretic approach to aesthetics will give us a language to talk about art and aesthetics. This will allow us to say something about art and aesthetics in general, that we might use when



describing what goes on at the courses, arranged by the parents associations.

We (in the db-field) are used to adapting theory via available knowledge of the human universals that govern communicative development. Why not do the same when we talk about art and aesthetics?

2.2 Making special and the aesthetic qualities - Some theory

One of our main theoretic inspirations in our project is the American anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake. She is working on the evolutionary and anthropological preconditions for why humans engage in artistic activities and have aesthetic experiences. In her 1992 book "Homo Aestheticus : where art comes from and why"¹ she argues for the evolutionary relations between: That something is valuable for me or for us; that I or we want to express this valuation; and the activity of making the valuable object or activity special. This process of "making special" is what she terms: *Artification*.

The origin of this kind of activity, she claims, is in religious and social rituals, where the very important ways of doing things where "made special" by "artification".

Modern art production is just our way today to give this activity a cultural form. But we do it in many other ways. We use time and energy to embellish ourselves, our surroundings, and the things that we gather round us. All of the things we do to show our selves and the world, that something is important to us, is an expression of this urge/instinct/drive towards "making special".

1 The Free Press, 1992. Paperback edition from University of Washington Press, 1995.

In Dissanayake's book from 2000: "Art and intimacy: How the arts began"² she put up four parameters of what she terms a *Naturalistic Aesthetics*³. These four parameters are, according to Dissanayake, present whenever humans have aesthetic experiences. That it is "naturalistic" means that the parameters are culture independent and human universal.

It is always interesting to know about human universals and culture independent parameters when dealing with congenital deafblindness. We must believe, that people with cdb have the same fundamental drives, instincts, and developmental parameters as everyone else. We know this is true at least regarding communication and communicative development.

That the parameters are culture independent mean, that they are independent of the specific expression. This provide us with a way to include the often very strange and not-normal bodily tactile expressions of the congenital deafblind.

The first parameter that Dissanayake puts up is *accessibility coupled with strikingness*. That it is *accessible* means that it is within the reach of our senses. That it is *striking* means that it has some structural features that will excite the senses in ways that are emotionally captivating and cognitively interesting. She touches upon the possibility of a "Proto-aesthetics", meaning that our senses and perception has evolved towards specific preferences. There is a lot of research into the nature of our sensation, perception, and cogni-

2 University of Washington Press, Seattle and London

3 p. 205ff

tion of sensory inputs that support this notion, and some of this will be given some attention in the final rapport from our project⁴.

There is no reason to believe that this should not also count for the people with deafblindness. The tactile perception and tactile cognition is part of the same cognitive system as the rest of our senses, and even though the tactile and haptic access to the world give some special conditions that influence how the deafblind person meet the world, the fundamental processes of perception and attention (and thereby access and strikingness), are governed by the same cognitive processes as the other senses⁵.

The second parameter is *Tangible Relevance*. It has to be relevant to me, in my situation, right now and in general. It must touch upon my belonging to a group (my relations to other people) my meaning construction (how I understand the world), and my competencies (the skills I need to possess).

The third parameter, *Evocative Resonance*, is the term Dissanayake uses to indicate, that the experience must touch upon the human condition in general.

Satisfying Fullness is the fourth parameter. The "artified" object, activity, or event must have been constructed and composed with care and commitment. This care and commitment must be manifested through the "artified" object, activity, or event.

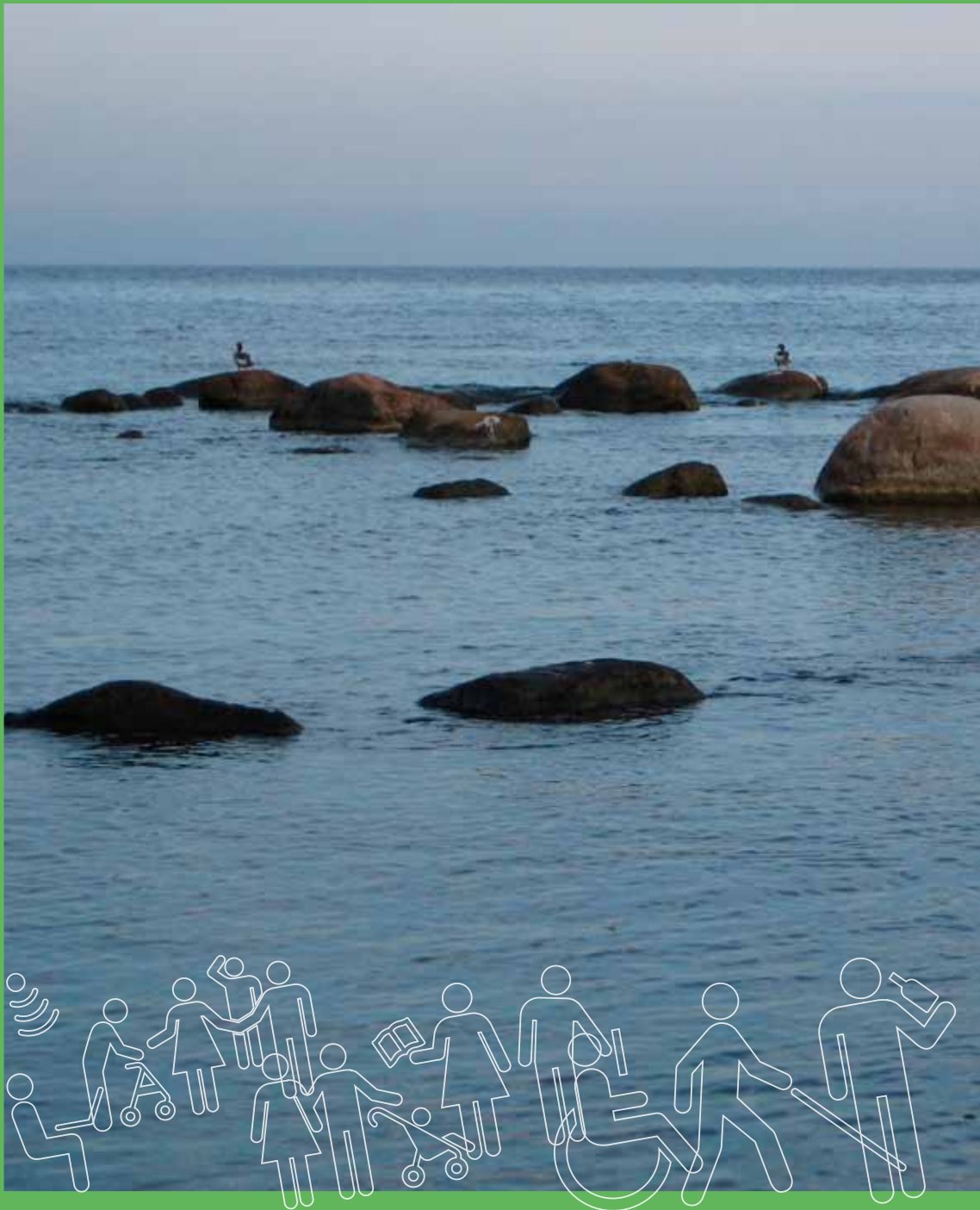
In addition to the four parameters, she points out, that aesthetic intention, and aesthetic context are important factors in the aesthetic experience. This mean that the setting/context need to fulfil the same four parameters as the artified object/activity/event – it has to be "made special". Thus the context itself needs to be accessible and striking, have tangible relevance, bring evocative resonance, and be performed with care and commitment. In other words: Both the artistic expression and the context in which it is experienced must be "made special".

We have found the terminology of Dissannayake very helpful in our attempts to describe and analyse the aesthetic activities that we have observed. We have been looking for the cues for such naturalistic aesthetic experiences, and tried to figure out in what way the "artification" process of "making special", and the "special", when it is "made", are available for the db person.

4 Especially the work of Ramachandran, V. S. & Hirstein, W. (1999): "The Science of Art – A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience" in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, No. 6-7, pp 15-51.

5 Cf. the work of Nicholas, Jude (in press): "From active touch to tactile communication: What's tactile cognition got to do with it?" in *Working Papers from the Cognition Network*, www.nordicwelfare.org.

Steen Raahauge



Video examples

At the workshop presentation the following text was a voice over, supplementing video clips, photos and power point. The intention was not to make a video analysis in the classical meaning, but to emphasize the aesthetic angle of the project.



The video you are about to see is a collage from the observations made during 2008. We recorded 30 hours of film – and took more than thousand pictures. This presentation, however, is a 12 minute collage that shows some of our findings.

(Video start)

“Kulturforbundets” courses take place in locations and settings where people live and work together for a week, 24 hours a day. We really had a jump start into this world of “art, chaos and collaboration”.

We experienced the sharing and the togetherness. We saw a lot of hard working people, who even had time for aesthetic reflections. We met all kinds of social interaction and communication - different kinds of communication - and then returned to watch the inspiring tasks again.

(Video paused)

Our observations started on Gotland, which by the way is known for its interesting stones - and rocks.



Example 1: The blacksmith

(Video continues)

Anyway we shall start in this trunk where a piece of iron was picked up and brought to the blacksmith.

The first step in this aesthetic experience seems to be the mere sensation of pleasure - in this case the smell of smoke, which then evokes the lust and need for exploration.

The second - and very important sensation during the process is most likely a social bonding tool: the bodily joy of the shared rhythm in the work process. (In ancient Greek - by the way - the word for rhythm probably covered both "organic flow" and "steady pulse")

Due to his sublime skills and experience the blacksmith participates in the process, using these skills - and his intuition - in a spontaneous way - by doing almost nothing.

They worked very hard for a week on the same piece of iron, which never really changed but was brought back almost the way it came in.

The first step in the experience - the sensation - mostly consists of physical pleasure, but exploring this also leaves room for reflection.

This example illustrates "the meaningfulness in something apparently purposeless". The product of this work was the beauty of the process.

(Video paused)



Example 2: The Hole

This hole plays a significant role in the next example.

(Video continues)

Here is a man – he is on his way to work. He is happy and hums a little tune, which by the way helps him to organize memories.

This example shows a process, which has a goal and a frame. But it also contains openness, where each person is focused on and in their individual aesthetic learning process. They are still working hand in hand, being equally pleased by fulfilling their part of a task they themselves define during the process - and to some degree wish to share.

(Video paused)

And who knows where the aesthetic sensation/experience

really breaks through – is it hidden in the details or in the process in general?

Example 3: The Dancer

In an evaluation from two Music and dance- course in 2005 at Slettestrand in Denmark¹, the pedagogues stated, among other things, that they also during the course week became aware of their own hidden resources. They themselves felt more skillful, playful and creative than they expected.

What happens?

What you are about to see now is not a performance, in the normal sense - because there are no spectators, only participants in this room with 30 people. It may seem chaotic, but it turns out to be extremely meaningful for all participants.



Please pay attention to the dancer in the black T-shirt and the

¹ Written, anonymous pedagogic research/evaluation from Slettestrand 2005 by Steen Raahauge - based on responses from 24 partners/pedagogues.

woman in red – and her connected pedagogues and their reactions.

(Video continues)

The dancer “makes special” this cdb woman in red and her way of being in the world. He himself is inspired by her, and through his appreciative eye her appearance becomes a dance – a piece of aesthetic communication. One could say artification takes place.

Example 4: The “jumper”

But a lot of other things take place in this room at the same time.

Here is - I think - a glimpse of a very interesting observation, which indicates and suggest some pedagogic possibilities.

(Video continues)

What you see is an expression of social competency which suggests



This captures the pedagogues and inspires them to experiment and - as you can see - even to cross some personal borders. They thereby expand their norm on, what dance can be.

(Video paused)

a kind of bonding through bodily connection to the community rhythm. This completely deaf blind young man shows a bodily interpretation of the “rhythm of the flock”. He furthermore uses it in a communicative way.

This is an example of aesthetic communication - which he refined and evolved during the course.

(Video paused)

This kind of bodily and "musical" interaction and experience has shown to leave traces - remembrances - of the cultural event - and the community it rose from.

Example 5: The drum in the stone

Social activities with music might have inspired this next aesthetic action, sculpturing, from Sømådalen in Norway.

One could say that artification takes place in an aesthetic practice over time and then through cultural recognition, becomes art in the sense we normally know it.

Here is an example of a process that covers "the full circle" of a "standard artification":

- inspiration - idea - connected and interweaved in the doing
- communication in the form of negotiation
- the "making special" - the me - in the we
- the exhibition that connects to the possibility of recognition through a revisit to this place in time and space, so to speak.

The next couple of minutes we call "The drum in the stone". I will let the video speak for itself.

(Video continues to the end.)

Steen Raahauge



4

CHAPTER



Pedagogic transfer value

Especially for persons with congenital deafblindness, experience is the result, the sign and the reward of the interaction between organism and environment.



These experiences¹ are transformations of that interaction into participation and communication.²

Aesthetic experiences cannot be replaced.

They are important parts of a whole and full life. They influence the way we perceive our nature, and the way we think.

Different art forms have had (and still have) different purposes in and through human evolution.

The “making special” and artification of items, surroundings and events, could be looked upon as aesthetic communication.

Aesthetic communication is expressed through idiomatic presentations.

It worships the sensation and the beauty in i.e. creative and creating processes. It can express things outside the verbal language.

It is found in decorations, in the design of our cities, in a touch and a silent whisper, in poetry, in rituals, in music, dance and sculptures.

It takes place through experiences where logical and empirical rules are combined with intuition and emotion.

1 The English word “experience” is used in two interpretations: a) having an experience/a sensation, and b) being experienced.

2 Freely after John Dewey



Aesthetic communication

- It has an open ended character.
- It is non analytic.
- It is ambiguous and metaphorical.
- It has numerous meanings and interpretations (and it is somewhat receiver dependent.)
- It seeks harmony in differences.

Aesthetic communication through an aesthetic process takes place over time in an existential-phenomenological setting.

4.1 How do we combine this with pedagogical practice?

Aesthetic practice can be used as a locomotive, pulling other processes, which interweave. But you have to realise and accept that it is not a method, and it is scriptless.



It's a way of thinking where you can dwell and contemplate in the experience - where you dare to be in the unknown and let go of the well known.

Firstly we have to be conscious of and really accept - that the door to development and learning opens from the inside.

There has to be something on the outside that makes you wish to appear – and explore.

There are two main issues to observe concerning transfer value to general pedagogic thinking:

Firstly, "the appreciative eye" – a way of thinking, which is perhaps already known within the pedagogic world.

Secondly, a "giving presents" attitude – to offer, a way to conduct your actions.

4.2 The three musketeers

I would like to introduce you to the three friends we met during our observations. They can be very useful in transferring aesthetic thinking into pedagogic values.

In this context their names are Logos – Pathos – and Ethos. Logos represents the factual substance of

the matter. Pathos represents the aesthetic dress, so to speak.

To make creative and skilful use of these two characters you really need a lot of practice.

But since this is not a matter of what you do, but a matter of how you approach it, you could right away put Ethos into play, as the character representing trustworthy authenticity.

To put Ethos seriously into play you could

- Do what really engages you - as a person
- Expect the unexpected.
- Be playful and surprise maybe even yourself
- Be contagious - in the social and openended character.
- Allow yourself to be carried away in a flow, not completely knowing where it takes you.

The pedagogic transfer value to common everyday activities is especially contained in the way you approach the activity.

Combining presence in "what is" with creativity, fantasy and skill, seem to positively influence the relation and support you, the



Athos, Porthos & Aramis aka Logos, Pathos & Ethos.

partner, in the way you conduct your work. Thus, by means of an aesthetic angle, you make activities special, i.e. transforming tooth brushing into a piece of music and table laying into a dance.

4.3 Follow your heartbeat - an exercise

You can't see in the picture, that under the table this cdb man is doing a kind of tap dance.

The room is full of people, small talking during their lunch break,

and to me this congenital deaf blind man is participating in his own way – conducting an aesthetic communication and appearance. We have a sound recording of that. We will play that in a moment.

But we could all try - here and now - a little open-ended musical experiment. Please everybody – find your pulse, and offer a sound for it. Don't consider me your conductor – just offer and share your sound and rhythm with everybody present.



The authors



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10 years of practice in planning and implementing courses in aesthetic practice for cdb; senior consultant and manager of E.N.O; musician; recording artist; composer; producer; appointed external examiner by the Danish Ministry of Culture.



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Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues

Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues

– an institution under the Nordic Council of Ministers

We work to shed light on and stimulate development of the Nordic welfare model.

Our work aims to promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups, equality, social solidarity, and accessibility and quality with regard to social services.

The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues has three main tasks:

Knowledge

We gather and compile experiences from the Nordic countries in the area of welfare policy.

Communication

We disseminate knowledge and experience of best practice through our activities and networks.

Dialogue

We create dialogue between politicians, researchers and practitioners.

We are active in the following areas:

- Alcohol and drug issues
- Economic inclusion
- Deafblindness
- Disability issues
- Social service
- The welfare model
- Welfare technology

Our organisation

The institution has its head office in Stockholm and branches in Denmark and Finland.

The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues is run by a board consisting of representatives from the five Nordic countries. The board is appointed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

We are assisted in our work by a network of Nordic institutions and experts. Their task is to anchor our work in practice and communicate the results to decision-makers and practitioners.

An important part of our work is international. We cooperate with international players in the area of social affairs and health, including the EU, Council of Europe and UN.