

Ethical Dialogue in Art Education: Immanence, Aesthetics, and Appearances in the Middle Ground

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Abstract: This article explores how art education can foster relational dialogue during a time when educational policy increasingly emphasizes individualised, outcomes-focused approaches. Using Dora García's *Exhausted Books* as an example, the article examines how art objects establish an aesthetic space where resistance, plurality, and relational meaning-making emerge. I conclude that recognising these aesthetic conditions is a vital aspect of art education and crucial for maintaining practices that promote ethical sociability and dialogic engagement with the world. The article presents a framework for educators aiming to cultivate openness, dissensus, and ethically grounded dialogue within contemporary learning environments.

Keywords: Art Education; Aesthetic Education; Dialogue; Plurality; Student Voice; Immanence

Introduction

In a landscape dominated by utilitarian education policies and financial constraints (Ball, 2016, 2018; Cultural Learning Alliance, 2025; Gale, 2020; Glăveanu et al., 2015; Guardian, 2023; Shin, 2025), the arts remain marginalised, undermining their distinctive pedagogical potential. Too often, the value of art in education is framed in instrumental terms—productivity, employability, or support for STEM—thereby narrowing its democratic and ethical potential (Desai & Duncombe, 2025; Säfström, 2021). While many approaches exist for the arts to develop these relational capacities, this paper specifically highlights the unique aesthetic-dialogic qualities of art education (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995, 2001; Atkinson, 2018; Biesta, 2017). It aims to move beyond epistemological approaches that focus on the cognitive and empirical dimensions of dialogue in education, instead emphasising arts-informed approaches to learning that more fully recognise the affective and relational qualities of dialogue that unfold within meaningful aesthetic encounters.

Here, 'meaningful' aesthetic encounters refer not simply to affective or sensory experiences, but to moments when perception, feeling, and interpretation become relationally charged, opening one's subjective and social understanding to the possibility of transformation. This positions the arts as meaningful not through consensus, but through processes of "experimentation, observation, deliberation, dialogue and interaction" that awaken "participants to their elemental connectedness with the world" (MacIntyre-Latta & Baer, 2010, p. 93). Importantly, an exact definition of what this 'looks' like may not be possible, as many factors will vary depending on the situation, the community's composition, and the topic being explored. What is important is attention to a process characterised by implicit qualities such as hesitation, openness, experimentation, deliberation, and interaction.

This ontological understanding of art education suggests that engaging with art objects can create shared spaces of experience in which individuals encounter resistance and otherness, disturbing habit and routine, and prompting reflection on "tastes, values, even prejudices that must be taken into account" (Greene, 1995, p. 163). As Maxine Greene (1995) noted, such encounters can reveal a "void to be filled, a wound to be healed, a flaw to be

repaired” (p. 159), opening possibilities for rethinking perspectives that might otherwise harden into hostility or fear. In this sense, aesthetic dialogue creates the conditions for engagement within what Gert Biesta (2017) describes as the middle ground, a space where meanings are negotiated rather than fixed. This also aligns with Hannah Arendt’s (1958) notion of a space of appearance, where individuals come into relation with others through acts of disclosure and participation.

Although conceptually distinct, bringing these ideas into conversation together is productive, as their differences illuminate complementary dimensions of how ethical dialogue might be understood. For example, Arendt’s (1958) ‘space of appearance’ refers to the public, political realm in which individuals disclose themselves through action. Biesta’s (2017) ‘middle ground’ describes a pedagogical space of encounter where subjectivity is formed through engagement with resistance. Greene’s (2001) emphasis on the transformative power of aesthetic experiences bridges these two points by bringing sociopolitical ideas into view through a close examination of educational aesthetic experiences.

To explore these ideas in a more practical way, I refer to Dora García’s *Exhausted Books* (2016) as an example of how aesthetic spaces offer meaningful encounters with ideas and opinions that may differ from one’s own. García’s work demonstrates that arts education remains pedagogically important because it fosters the continuing conditions for relational meaning, collective understanding, and shared experience. I then conclude by discussing some implications for classroom practice, exploring how experiences in the arts can promote dialogue that connects individuals to a shared world. By exploring how art education can promote aesthetic dialogue, I argue for its essential role in supporting socially ethical, pluralistic, and democratic forms of education. This article is therefore offered as a theoretical contribution to the field, providing an incomplete framework for ethical dialogues in art education that accommodates the multiplicity and relationality of lived experience.

Towards a Theory of Dialogical Immanence

Many accounts of dialogue in education privilege transcendent forms of learning oriented toward predefined knowledge, outcomes, and norms. In such approaches, meaning is directed beyond the immediate encounter, positioning learning as the achievement of externally determined ends. While this can extend awareness, it risks marginalising what Dennis Atkinson (2018) described as the immanent conditions of learning.

An immanent conception of dialogue shifts focus from the measurable results of schooling to what arises within the learning encounter itself. It remains sensitive to the emotional, relational, and ethical possibilities that emerge through engagement. From this perspective, educational dialogue is not about transmitting or revealing fixed knowledge. Rather, it is about nurturing a way of relational knowing that evolves through openness to uncertainty, difference, and becoming.

Overreliance on transcendent frameworks can disconnect knowledge from lived experience, obscuring the embodied, affective, and improvisational aspects of learning. In doing so, educators risk reducing learning to simply accumulating and memorising information rather than recognising it as an ontological shift that acknowledges the potential of who learners might yet become (Atkinson, 2007). Immanence counteracts this limitation by emphasising the emergent, sensory, and relational interplay of thinking, feeling, and action as learning naturally unfolds (Atkinson, 2018).

This has considerable implications for dialogic encounters involving complex social issues. As Yoon-Ramirez (2023) clarified, transcendent orientations can dampen the emotional intensity of discussions on topics such as race or colonialism, allowing discomfort to be deferred or ignored rather than addressed. In such cases, dialogue risks becoming

merely performative rather than genuinely transformative, resulting in a response that lacks responsibility.

To move beyond this impasse, educators and learners must engage with the disruptive force of dialogic immanence through what Atkinson (2018) called “pedagogies of encounter, pedagogies of relevance and negotiation” (p. 24). Crucially, this negotiation unfolds not only externally among educators, learners, and the world but also within the subject, as one confronts the tensions between habitual ways of understanding and the unsettling demands that emerge from immanent dialogic encounters. As bell hooks (1994) wrote, “learning that genuinely transforms is rarely comfortable; it involves “some degree of pain” as old ways of knowing are relinquished” (p. 42). Failing to attend to this immanent discomfort risks undermining the possibility of sustained ethical and political action.

For learning to remain transformational, it must enable participants to speak “as who and not what they are” (Greene, 1995, p. 115). In this sense, dialogue is not merely a tool for closure but a mode of disclosure. It becomes an ongoing, relational practice that is inseparable from the conditions shaping the learning community itself (Jahoda & Woolard, 2019). Such work stays within the immanent, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of experience, where ethical transformation arises through potentially demanding “reciprocal acts of giving and receiving” (Rallis et al., 2024).

This is where the arts become vital. They provide an aesthetic space where learners engage in embodied relations with what and who is different. As Goutam Biswas (1995) suggested, the arts generate aesthetic experiences that foster a “phenomenological symbiosis” (p. 31), connecting individual and collective experiences and revealing a complex reality. By thinking within the domain of the aesthetic, arts education promotes engagement with this complexity, discomfort, and difference. Although such encounters involve risk, this risk should not be avoided. Instead, it is a necessary condition for developing the capacity to participate in ethical dialogue with others in a shared world.

The Aesthetic Conditions for Immanent, Ethical Dialogue

Greene’s (1978) discussion of the “lived world” (p. 213) helps clarify what I mean by ethical dialogue. She argued that genuine educational freedom depends on enabling learners to act on their own desires and visions rather than conforming to externally imposed expectations. Therefore, standardised norms and rigid evaluative frameworks risk limiting imaginative spontaneity and diversity, which are essential for creative and ethical action. For Greene, ethical dialogue arises from aesthetic experiences that encourage all individuals to perceive differently, recognise the influence of power and othering, and take responsibility for their choices in relation to others.

Art objects support these conditions by creating relational spaces of appearance (Arendt, 1958) where learners both present themselves as individuals and engage with perspectives and values different from their own. Once again, this process is not always straightforward. As Kerry Chappell and Anna Craft (2011) observed, empathy within creative processes is “an emotional journey” which is “not always about ‘fun’” (p. 365). Nevertheless, these moments of friction and resistance are pedagogically essential to *educational* experiences (Dewey, 1938). They enable learners to reflect on the consequences of their actions (Dewey, 1934), and to encounter otherness in ways that foster what Shannon Leddy (2014) described as “an informed merging of self and other” (p. 9).

This becomes possible when, as Atkinson (2018) highlighted, “learners are encouraged to go beyond established parameters of knowledge and practice” (p. 44). To do so, he continued, learners need access to forms of knowing that arise from the “immediacy and contingency of experience” (p. 45). It is through the meanings that coalesce in this

process that one begins to understand all that one does not yet know about the relations that exist between oneself and other human and non-human entities.

Unlike external transcendent frameworks, fixed meanings imposed from a distance, this relational process unfolds within the dynamic interpretive space the art object generates. Here, worldviews engage and collide, producing new understandings and opening possibilities for repairing fractures in an increasingly polarised culture (Leonard, 2020). In short, because the arts have no *fixed* meaning, they affirm diversity and the “right to be different” (Adorno, 1997, p. 132), providing access to a middle ground (Biesta, 2017) where ethical dialogue can take hold and flourish.

Ethical Dialogue in the Middle Ground

In *Letting Art Teach*, Biesta (2017) employs the concept of the “middle ground” (p. 65) to depict an aesthetic space where members of a community learn and “take action in continuous dialogue with one another” (Jahoda & Woolard, 2019, p. 109). This is a relational space in which one encounters the world, and where one’s sociality and subjectivity are shaped through engagements that challenge habit, unsettle the familiar, and prompt new questions about how to live and communicate well with others.

Biesta (2017), like Greene (2001), regards the middle ground as an aesthetic space that links experiences in the arts with the wider textures of everyday life, including emotions, encounters, and events. However, instead of emphasising the broadening of perception, Biesta focuses on how individuals engage with what the arts make visible. Importantly, while this visibility can foster connection, it can also accentuate differences through moments of resistance and response. In such moments, dialogue is not about possessing, asserting, or assigning a fixed meaning, but about opening oneself to new perspectives and expanding one’s capacity to perceive and connect with others.

In these moments, the task is to remain open to what might challenge previously held understandings of oneself, others, and the shared world. In this sense, aesthetic encounters become socially embedded rather than belonging solely to either an individual or a community. They are intersubjective experiences that open spaces for ethical dialogue, shared meaning-making, and new ways of relating to others (Greene, 1995; Biesta, 2017).

Although Greene (2001) does not explicitly use the term middle ground, her work repeatedly suggests an aesthetically informed space where individuals can pay closer attention to what is happening among themselves, others, and the world. Sustained engagement with the arts can foster this attentiveness, allowing individuals to go beyond the confines of their own experience and become more open to plurality, difference, and alternative perspectives.

These encounters are, of course, merely a starting point. However, when integrated into a broader, aesthetically informed approach to teaching and learning, they serve as powerful ways to question transcendent, fixed, or authoritarian notions of knowledge and redefine understanding as immanent, relational, dialogic, and continuously evolving (Biesta, 2017). This process of aesthetically attuned learning helps develop some of the capacities individuals need to become “fully participant in this society without losing the consciousness of who they are” (Greene, 1995, p. 165).

More recently, in her book, *Dissens and Sensibility*, Lisbet Skregelid (2024), described something like this middle ground as:

a meeting place between subjectivity and objectivity, between the real and imaginary, between those one knows and those one cannot know, between the routine and the break, between the conscious and unconscious. (p. 33)

Along with the other accounts, this description further illustrates how an aesthetic middle ground functions as a dialogic space. Its aim is not to eliminate uncertainty or differences but to enable diverse experiences and understandings to coexist within a space that promotes listening and reflective action. In such environments, both educators and students shape each other's understanding by collectively questioning, testing, and expanding their concept of what it means to live according to a shared idea of a common good "made and remade in the light of differing perspectives" (Greene, 1995, p. 195).

Although differing in emphasis, Atkinson (2018), Greene (1995, 2001), and Biesta (2017) offer complementary explanations that help build an understanding of ethical aesthetic dialogue. Atkinson emphasises the immanent, emergent conditions of learning; Greene stresses how aesthetic experience broadens perception and ethical awareness; and Biesta focuses on how individuals relate to others through encounters characterised by resistance and responsibility. Shared among all these ideas is the need to remain open to friction or resistance rather than seeking to dominate, resolve, or bypass it entirely. Whether encountered through new ideas, troublesome materials, or challenging artworks, resistance and discomfort can be a necessary part of learning, disrupting habitual ways of thinking and encouraging individuals to reconsider their relationships with others. In this sense, the middle ground is not a space of agreement but one where difference is encountered, maintained, and worked through in relation.

In my own teaching practice, I have found that this middle ground easily collapses under the weight of transcendent forces such as didactic instruction, authoritarian control, or instrumentalisation. However, when nurtured, it becomes an ethical and educational space that invites students to reflect on the desirability of their desires in relation to others (Biesta, 2017). In this space, one discovers the edges of a better world, bringing it into being through an open and ongoing dialogue that participants must "nurture in the midst of change" (Greene, 1995, p. 196). Here, one learns to listen, to slow down, to defer, and to allow what is other to emerge without rushing to categorise or assimilate what is encountered.

Spaces of Appearance and Ethical Sociability

Finding ways to cultivate this middle ground is important if one recognises that ethical dialogue across differences is fundamental to living a meaningful life. Yet this middle ground requires communities of learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) that recognise each member's right to appear and act ethically in relation to one another. This means each member must be open to listening and, when necessary, yielding to others as their individual and collective aspirations shape a shared understanding of the world and its complexity.

On this point, Greene (2001) argued that reflective encounters with diverse works of art can make learning communities more aware of alternative ways of living, relating to others, and becoming otherwise. Engagement with the arts can also loosen the hold of routine and habit, allowing one's interpretive formations to acquire new meaning in a developing, dynamic present. Put simply, knowledge that might otherwise have appeared transcendentally given and fixed becomes open to adaptation and change through immanent understanding, allowing the future to emerge as a space of possibility.

For example, as a closeted queer student, I recall seeing Robert Mapplethorpe's photography and feeling uneasy, perhaps even afraid. This was largely a response to the bigoted transcendent values that circulated in the late 1990s. As images that challenged homophobic narratives, these works exposed me in a way that supports Brian Massumi's (2015) argument that the affective power of aesthetic objects is porous, fluid, and always in some way connected to the social atmosphere and context that surrounds them (Bennett, 2012). Yet, through an ongoing engagement with these works, I began to question my

reactions, exploring their origins and allowing them to reshape my understanding of the desires I was experiencing in relation to what others expected from me.

Eventually, my emerging state of becoming required engaging in dialogue with others. As Arendt (1958) suggested, freedom only survives through an ability to act in the public domain. Yet, as I lived and learned under the influence of Section 28ⁱ, which prohibited the (positive) discussion of homosexuality in UK schools, two outcomes became likely. Without the ability to act on my desires, I risked withdrawing an essential part of myself from the world, thereby risking the destruction of my “existence as a subject” (Biesta, 2017, p. 65). Conversely, by denying queer students the capacity to appear and live openly, the school risked the “destruction of the very world” (Biesta, 2017, p. 64) in which plurality and dialogue might flourish.

This example highlights how transcendent pressures are always entangled with both the immanence of personal becoming and the ethical responsibility of sustaining a world in which all can appear. In this sense, while the middle ground describes the pedagogical conditions through which ethical dialogue might unfold, the space of appearance refers to the broader social and political condition that renders such encounters publicly meaningful. Importantly, while neither Arendt (1958) nor Biesta (2017) frame their arguments explicitly in terms of *ethical* dialogue, both position art as central to the conditions that make a common world appear. This is because art holds space for a plurality of desires, histories, and values, which can be both enabling and constraining, prompting individuals to reflect on them within wider frameworks and to encounter how their own perspectives are shaped in relation to others.

In this dialogic process, art objects participate in worlding (Heidegger, 2001) by creating new opportunities and possibilities. They provide more nuanced descriptions of reality and open new pathways for thought and action. Speaking from the perspective of aesthetic experience, Greene (1995) described this space as one in which “distinctive members of the plurality” (p. 167) appear before one another, enriching what can be seen, felt, and thought. In an era characterised by withdrawal and division, recognising the radical potential of such spaces is urgent.

However, this process of worlding is never neutral. It is shaped by power, history, and politics. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) wrote that dominant cultures elevate certain desires while silencing others, a tendency amplified in the age of hyper-information and generative AI. Therefore, the task of educators is to provide learning opportunities and conditions that help foster the “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (Spivak, 2004, p. 526). I have tried to highlight that this is a specific quality of the plural aesthetic experiences that the arts offer, and the spaces of appearance they create.

Educators must therefore ask: who is permitted to appear? Whose desires are considered desirable? Whose images circulate? In art education, this involves creating spaces where marginalised or unspoken desires can emerge and be collectively examined through the relational qualities of aesthetic education.

Such engagement is not simply about seeing the world differently, but about cultivating the reflexive abilities necessary to build communities through mutual recognition of what might otherwise remain unspoken, unheard, or unnoticed. It is this broadened sense of responsibility towards others that encourages more pluralistic and ethical forms of exchange. By fostering conditions of visibility and relationality in the intermediary space, art education revitalises the public sphere, allowing individuals to act as critical, responsive, and imaginative participants within a shared world.

Figure 1*Exhausted Books installation at MACBA*

Note. Photograph of the installation by the author. *Barcelona (2024).*

Example of Ethical dialogue: Dora García's Exhausted Books

In this section, I expand the theoretical argument by exploring how immanent, aesthetic dialogue functions in practice through Dora García's *Exhausted Books* (hereinafter EB). The installation presents annotated copies of *Finnegans Wake*, each bearing traces of previous readers' notes, markings, and inserted materials, arranged across a table surrounded by empty chairs. These vacant seats serve not merely as invitations but as ethical positions, situating participants within an ongoing dialogue that precedes and exceeds them.

What is pedagogically significant is not only the variety of interpretations but also the conditions under which they are experienced. Participants are positioned not as interpreters seeking correct meaning but as co-contributors within an immanent, relational process of meaning-making (Atkinson, 2018). The annotated books visualise this process, making the hesitations, disagreements, and partial understandings of this dialogue clear. It shows how participants collectively developed their understanding of the text by remaining open to the possibility of disagreement and uncertainty, conditions that became essential for productive engagement rather than an obstacle.

EB thus functions as a literal and metaphorical middle ground (Biesta, 2017), where meanings are constantly reshaped through encounter. Instead of guiding participants toward

fixed outcomes, the installation resists instrumental pedagogical frameworks, allowing dialogue to develop through the aesthetic encounter itself. As García (2023) suggested, the work contains an excess of meaning that cannot be stabilised but must be negotiated collectively. In doing so, it highlights dialogue as an ongoing process of response, responsibility, and becoming within a mutually constructed world.

To this end, EB does not view dialogue in a transcendent pedagogical sense. The empty chairs around the table do not position the audience as individual subjects to be directed toward a single message, but rather as part of a community engaged in an ongoing dialogue, incomplete and open to possibilities. In this way, the work opposes the instrumental logic of transcendent educational forces, which often seek to harness dialogue for predetermined ethical or cognitive goals. Instead, the installation abolishes the rules of transcendent instruction altogether, immersing participants in a realm of fluid, immanent learning, where mutually constructed meanings can emerge through the aesthetic encounter itself. Transposed into classroom practice, this seating arrangement indicates a form of engagement that disrupts traditional pedagogical setups that place focus on the teacher, individualise learning, and steer dialogue towards fixed outcomes. Instead, it proposes learning environments organised around co-presence, shared attention, and open-ended participation, where dialogue is not solely directed but maintained as a collective, ongoing, and relational process.

García's installation does this by recognising that an art object's meaning depends on how audiences engage with it. Thus, any art object can contain an infinite number of possible meanings, each made accessible by the positionality of the viewer. In her own words:

[T]he book is about everything, it's about world history, it's about the history of Europe. It's about the history of Ireland, it's about recent history... the legendary history of Ireland and the recent history of Ireland, it's about Joyce's family, it's about much more. It's about all the wars that there have been and will be. (García, 2023, 6:53)

This passage emphasises the vast gap between the twin poles of the art object and the audience's diverse experiences of it. In this way, the art object becomes a communal aesthetic space, a middle ground, where "winning is not an option" (Biesta, 2017, p. 65). Put simply, the work's evolving meanings are continually co-created by the many individuals who bring their lived experiences to it. Since no participant can claim ownership of these meanings, there is always room for new understandings and perspectives to emerge, guiding those gathered towards new configurations and an awareness that their knowledge of the world remains necessarily incomplete (Greene, 2005). García's installation can therefore be understood as expressing this constructive and productive form of aesthetic agonism.

The immanent dialogic process García documented exemplifies dialogue rooted in ethical relationships and attentive to the quality of what is being expressed. This dialogue is made possible within the aesthetic space curated by the art object itself. This space does not exist before the moment of encounter but is created through the complex interactions of what individuals come to feel, see, and hear, and what these experiences make visible to others. Here, dialogue develops through a growing sense of response, responsibility, care, and attentiveness to the dignity of others. García's work demonstrates how art objects create spaces of engagement where communities-in-the-making (Greene, 1995) relate ethically by listening, respecting differences, and accepting accountability for their interpretations and actions.

Through this process, a collective understanding of what the art object signifies develops within an educational space that exists between the extremes of "world-destruction" and "self-destruction" (Biesta, 2017, p. 65), as I mentioned in relation to my own queer becoming. This echoes Atkinson's (2018) idea of immanence and of "being in the middle" of

an art encounter, a way of thinking “not governed by established identities, representations, or predications” (p. 122). In this dialogic space, art provides the cognitive conditions for individuals and communities to explore what it means to live and create meaning in relation to the world, giving that meaning form through communal action with others.

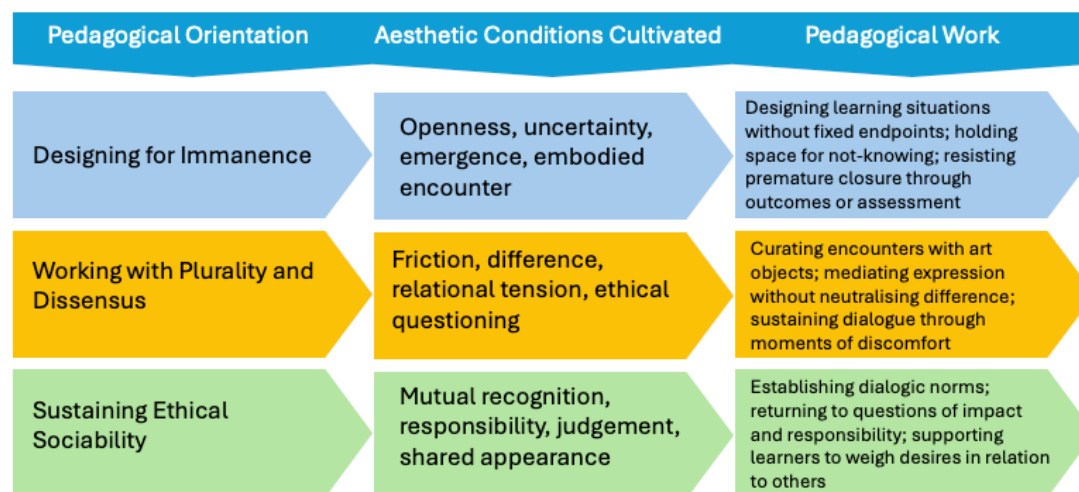
An unfinished framework for cultivating ethical dialogue

I began this paper by asking how the arts can foster aesthetic spaces for dialogue that support just, sustainable, and compassionate futures. I have argued that these possibilities weaken when the aesthetic conditions that underpin ethical dialogue are compromised by instrumental goals. By integrating distinct but related concepts, such as Atkinson’s (2018) account of immanence and transcendence, Biesta’s (2017) idea of the middle ground, Greene’s (2001) focus on aesthetic experience, and Arendt’s (1958) spaces of appearance, I have demonstrated that nurturing aesthetic conditions for plurality, dissensus, and relational encounter is a vital educational pursuit, influencing how learners attend to difference, respond to others, and engage in shared meaning-making.

In this spirit, the following framework is shaped by the dialogic conditions explored in García’s EB, where meaning develops through shared, ongoing acts of engagement. Importantly, the surface complexity of EB might suggest a level of interpretive skill associated with more advanced learners. However, these fundamental pedagogical principles are intended to be flexible, meeting learners where they are through the educational potential of the aesthetic encounter itself.

For younger children, this may develop through sensory exploration, play, and shared attention to the expressive and resistant qualities of materials, where difference is experienced as variations in outcomes, perceptions, feelings, and responses. As learners grow, these encounters can become more explicitly reflective, contextual, and relational, supporting the questioning and reconfiguration of meaning in more socially informed ways. In this sense, the tendency to perceive and question is not a skill to be introduced and measured at a specific age. Instead, it is an essential form of active noticing that allows learning to better recognise the rich complexity and contradictions that resonate at different frequencies in real-world encounters (Greene, 2001). In this context, ethical aesthetic dialogue is not something introduced at a particular developmental stage, but something that must be encouraged through attentiveness, responsiveness, and the capacity to stay open to difference.

To encourage this attunement, I present a flexible, unstable, and unfinished framework to support art educators in designing learning environments that sustain immanent, dialogic, and ethically responsive forms of learning. The framework is organised around three interrelated pedagogical orientations (Figure 2) that guide educators in designing, sustaining, and responding to moments of dialogue as they emerge through aesthetic encounters.

Figure 2*Pedagogic framework for immanent dialogue*

Note. This figure provides a flexible framework that educators may refer to when considering pedagogical approaches that foster and support the kind of immanent, dialogic work depicted in Garcia’s installation.

Orientation 1: Designing for Immanence

A key implication of this argument is the need to move away from mainly transcendent approaches to learning centred on prior knowledge, intended outcomes, fixed interpretations, and assessment-driven thinking, which limit the openness and unpredictability of aesthetic and creative inquiry.

Such an approach emphasises the exploratory nature of learning, guiding students to value the process itself rather than just acquiring skills or reaching predetermined goals. From my experience, this becomes clear when students are encouraged to engage with materials in ways that promote dialogue about their limitations and potentials. For example, when working with clay, students might explore how thin or tall the material can become before it resists their intentions. This illustrates a mode of learning rooted in attentiveness to the act of meaning-making “from within the act itself” (MacIntyre-Latta & Bear, 2010, p. 95). The result is a more immediate form of learning, where meaning cannot be fully predicted in advance and therefore cannot be entirely imposed externally.

For educators, this involves shifting from designing lessons around “transcendent frameworks that structure and determine learning and teaching” (Atkinson, 2018, p. 21) to designing conditions that spark “new ways of making, seeing, thinking and feeling” (Ibid, p. 30). Within these immanent moments of learning, there can be no ultimate or predefined answer. Instead, learners are invited to engage with what offers resistance, and to ask whether their desires, actions, and interpretations are desirable in relation to the needs and desires of others, including human and non-human agents. Through the cultivation of these conditions, learning becomes a process of remaining in relation to the affective present, rather than fixing attention on one’s arrival at some predetermined resolution.

Such orientations have already been outlined by Chappell and Craft (2011), who described immanent, process-oriented forms of learning as living dialogues that “flatten our hierarchies and open spaces that promote a sense of equality” (p. 364). Paying attention to the

embodied and affective aspects of these encounters allows educators not only to support aesthetic inquiry but also to challenge and interrupt transcendent structures that otherwise influence the flow and force of learning. Importantly, it is the disobedient “force of art” (Atkinson, 2018, p. 30) that enriches and deepens these interactions. As with García’s EB, the aesthetic experience of art provides those engaged in creative opportunities to reflect on their learning situations and to make ethical adjustments in response (Chappell & Craft, 2011).

Orientation 2: Working With Plurality, Friction, and Disagreement

If these immanent moments of uncertainty and emergence are to develop into ethical dialogues, educators must also be prepared to engage with the challenges of plurality, friction, and disagreement rather than seeking to suppress them. However, this does not mean that anything can or should be expressed. As Biesta (2017) argued, while expression is central to art education, it is equally important to consider the *quality* of what is being expressed. Therefore, creating space for expression cannot be divorced from questions about how this expressive content might impact others within a shared learning community.

This work often involves messiness and requires participants to accept some discomfort as their views are challenged and affirmed through collective engagement. However, this risk, which is fundamental to an ontologically immanent view of learning, is what allows individuals to gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others and their environment. In practice, this might mean creating space for conflicting interpretations of an artwork without trying to resolve them and encouraging students to consider how their perspectives affect others in the group rather than aiming for agreement.

For example, instead of asking students to interpret a work based on predefined expectations, educators might encourage them to respond through drawing, movement, or annotation. As with EB, students can begin to engage with the work in personal and contextual ways, allowing meanings to emerge through encounter rather than being passively accepted as a single *correct* interpretation. As these responses start to interact, participants need to recognise that not all meanings are equally valid, and that there is a shared responsibility to “look through one another’s eyes, to take each other’s perspectives upon the world” (Greene, 2001, p. 108).

This becomes particularly significant when we acknowledge that less desirable or harmful viewpoints already exist, whether openly voiced in the classroom or not (Cinquemani & Kraehe, 2020; Yoon-Ramirez, 2023). From this perspective, moments of friction and resistance are not pedagogical failures but necessary qualities of a world-centred education (Biesta, 2017). Put another way, these moments of resistance are where learners can question how meanings are formed, how values circulate, and how expressions shape the conditions under which others can appear.

Art objects play a vital role in this process by creating aesthetic spaces for students to investigate subjective, social, and cultural values in connection with complex issues such as race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, and the climate crisis. The “force” of art, as Atkinson (2018) states, enables “for critique coupled with invention” and an “opportune moment, where being is endlessly constructed” (p. 30). It is this ongoing process of reinvention that fosters an ethical dialogue in the space between participants. In this way, art objects, such as *Finnegans Wake* in García’s EB, serve as shared reference points that support what Biesta (2017) described as “a way of existing with something or someone in such a way that there is room for all to exist” (p. 65). These dialogic encounters are risky, often producing dissensus that can challenge transcendent ideals of harmony or consensus.

Orientation 3: Sustaining Ethical Sociability

Cultivating dialogue in art education requires sustained attention to ethical sociability—the conditions through which individuals learn to live, think, and act with others in difference. Common to the ideas of Atkinson (2018), Greene (1995), and Biesta (2017), ethical socialisation is not understood as the transmission of shared values or the achievement of some consensus, but as an ongoing, relational process of encountering something or someone different to oneself. Such moments need to acknowledge that “some issues are complex and that we all need to take time to think and respond thoughtfully” (Oxfam, 2018, p. 8). In such cases, transcendent approaches to teaching and learning are not sufficient, as the answers to these complex questions, if there even are any, are not yet available to us. From this perspective, discomfort, uncertainty, and disagreement are not obstacles to learning but generative openings that require a disposition of curious generosity.

Navigating these moments of friction may involve structured pauses during discussion, during which students reflect on how their contributions shape the shared space or revisit earlier interpretations, including their own and others’ responses to similar issues. Slowing down in this way enables opinions to develop in relation to what unfolds, rather than rushing to meet expectations. As early childhood educator Minsun Shin (2025) noted, this serves as an antidote to the kinds of “hurried curricula” that “push for early academic achievement, standardized assessments, tightly scheduled routines, and predetermined checklists” (p. 2).

The arts are essential to this process because they embed learning within lived, sensory, and material experiences that defy finality. In this way, aesthetic experiences in the arts always involve a subjective encounter with someone or something other than oneself, creating conditions in which learners must engage with responsibility, agency, and action as relational rather than individual concerns. Therefore, pedagogically, the role of art educators is not to avoid friction but to sustain an aesthetic–ethical space for reflection and dialogue with the world.

Educators can support this by establishing norms of mutual recognition, inviting learners to reflect on how their interpretations enable or constrain others’ ability to appear, and making visible the historical, cultural, and personal forces shaping their responses. Art objects act as shared mediators in this process, allowing communities to negotiate which actions, desires, and interpretations are ethically viable. Over time, such practices improve learners’ capacities for judgment and responsible action, fostering sensibilities attuned to plurality, responsibility, and the potentiality of shared life.

Towards a Conclusion

By emphasising the affective, perceptual, and material aspects of aesthetic experiences and creative practice, art education fosters unique relational spaces where learners encounter otherness, reflect on their desires, and negotiate their responsibilities to others and the world. These encounters are unpredictable and often challenging, shaped by broader social and political influences. Yet it is precisely through these dialogic processes, as exemplified by García’s EB, that the arts foster the ethical sociability essential to democratic life.

This article suggests that art education is particularly well suited to cultivating these conditions by framing dialogue as an ontological and aesthetic practice of being with others in difference. By incorporating immanence (Atkinson, 2018), aesthetic engagement and perceptual transformation (Greene, 2001), the pedagogical middle ground (Biesta, 2017), and

the political space of appearance (Arendt, 1958), it provides an emerging theoretical framework for understanding how ethical dialogue can develop through aesthetic experience.

To support such possibilities, educational environments must remain open to uncertainty, accept dissensus, and attend to the embodied and relational dimensions of learning. In this context, the importance of aesthetic, creative, and arts-based approaches to teaching and learning goes beyond instrumental aims. Its value lies in an innate ability to create aesthetic spaces of plurality, where learners can engage with difference, stay receptive to resistance, and envision new ways of living together in a shared world. Here, education becomes not just the transfer of knowledge but a continuous practice through which dialogue, new beginnings, and ethical coexistence can flourish.

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ⁱ Section 28 was a UK law introduced in 1988 that prohibited local authorities and schools from “promoting homosexuality” or presenting same-sex relationships as a normal family structure. It created a climate of fear and silence around LGBTQ+ identities in education and was repealed in 2003 (2000 in Scotland).