Introducing Aesthetic Features in Gymnastic Skills

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The term “aesthetics” derives from the Greek “aesthetic” and pertains to the general sense of beauty. From a philosophical perspective, it deals with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc. As applied to the fine arts, it establishes the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, as well as the principles underlying or justifying such judgments. Therefore, aesthetics are typically confined to artistic endeavours.

In a work of art, artistic and aesthetic concepts coexist. Artistic appreciation implies knowledge and understanding of context within a work of art (Savrami, 2001). Aesthetics are present in all art forms, but have a wide range of applications in movement skills. In a study by Fromel, Novosad, and Svozil (1999) with 4,336 girls in elementary, middle, and high schools, a majority preferred the aesthetic character of movement activity, that is, dance and aerobics activities. For this article, the term “dance” covers all types of dance activities—Latin, country, disco, and so on.

In dance, there is the quality of the dance itself (including the performers) and the qualities that emerge within the spectators: what the audience experiences as it meets and interacts with a dance event (Preston-Dunlop, 1995). This is a reciprocal procedure that must always be in mind while choreographing a dance.

In a similar manner, in gymnastics, the quality of routines as they are performed makes the difference between two or more athletes of the same ability level. However, the aesthetic features are not always apparent. Fortunately, there are characteristics that differentiate simple movement skills from artistic, aesthetic gymnastic skills. This paper focuses on an aesthetic approach that takes the simplest functional skill, such as walking, and develops it into an artistic skill. The aim then is to identify aesthetic characteristics and examine ways to apply them in gymnastics classes.

The learning environment in a gymnastic class must encourage creativity by allowing learners to test their skillfulness in new skills or through variations of skills they already know. According to “schema theory” (Schmidt, 1975), skill learning is established through the formation of schemas, abstract memory representations for events, or skilled actions. The learner stores movement parameters (body positions, weight of thrown objects, movement outcomes, sensory consequences of the movement, etc.) in such a way as to reuse them in different ways. For example, when the scissors leap is introduced in a gymnastic class, specific characteristics of the movement should be cued in order to ensure storage but also to make them available for the performance of similar skills. For example, the specific characteristics of the scissors leap are (a) a powerful push as the legs leave the floor and (b) split-kicking the legs forward while stretching the foot and leg at the same time. These are the parameters that learners should remember if they want either to perform the same skill or to alter it somehow, e.g., jump with split-kicking of the legs forward and 180° turn.

In a similar way, teachers must reinforce new variations of movement skills, especially for students who are functionally active, but without any apparent aesthetic interest. A simple and representative example could be the action of walking, which is a functional, inherent movement that serves as the basic ingredient of many gymnastic combinations. During the sensori-motor period (Piaget, 1964), a period of time spanning birth to 18 months, the infant seeks to explore and discover the world around him/her. Locomotor movements involve changes in body position that propel the body over the surface area, with impetus being given by the feet and legs (Humphrey, 1987). Because walking is the child’s first experience with bipedal locomotion, the initial walking action is quite mechanical. Once mature, the walk occurs naturally, transferring weight from one leg to the other, in coordination with the opposite arm and according to personal rhythm.

There are various ways to develop a natural walk with an aesthetic quality:

- **Vary the use of weight.** This affects the levels and position of the body. For example, the natural walk follows a rhythm of 4/4, at an equal level (whether on flat foot or raised toes/releve) for all steps. If the rhythm is altered to 3/4, the walk becomes a *triple step*, where the levels are down-up-up, or medium-high-high, accomplished by bending the knees and rising up on toes. To introduce this variation to children, compare the first of the three steps with *bear walking* and the remaining two with *flamenco walking*. From the point of view of weight, the triple step has a different quality from that of a natural walk. It can be characterized as heavy-light-light in terms of dynamics. This rhythmic variation can be derived internally, like breathing, or by external stimuli, such as musical accompaniment, giving a different movement result each time. For example, using the triple step, have the...
learners follow their breath, exhaling on the first step and inhaling on the second and third. This alters the quality of the walk by giving an impulsive result. When they work against the initial pattern, that is inhale-exhale-exhale, the result could be impressive.

- **Vary flow.** Flow is distinguished by two different qualities, sudden and sustained. In the sudden condition, learners try to arrest energy in each step; whereas, in sustained condition, they try to continue it. Another alternative is to arrest flow on one step and continue it on steps two and three (Laban, 1980, 1984; Preston-Dunlop, 2002). As an example for an elementary gymnastic class, suggest they make steps as if somebody is watching them (sudden) or to walk like the pink panther (sustained).

- **Vary space.** Learners can use space either directly, with straight lines, or in a flexible way, making curved pathways (Preston-Dunlop, 1983). To apply these in a gym class, draw fluorescent lines on the floor, making different shapes and sizes; then ask the children to follow them. Divide the kids into groups of 4-5 persons, each belonging to one of the shapes. They can walk in their shapes according to a rhythmic accompaniment, moving clockwise to change shapes. This way, they move around, covering the whole surface of the gym and avoid getting bored.

- **Vary direction.** Vary learners’ choices by either keeping the same direction for the whole time of a motif performance or changing the directions within a motif, that is, travelling forward, backward, and sideways toward right or left (Preston-Dunlop, 2002). This is easily applied in a gymnastic sequence by dividing the kids into four groups and then arranging them to make a cross. They can walk alternatively or simultaneously in four different directions. The result is much more interesting than using just one direction.

- **Phrasing.** Variations of weight and rhythm, flow, space, and directions lead to phrasing, defined as the smallest and simplest unit of form. It has a definite beginning, middle, and end, which makes it a short but complete unit (Bloom & Chaplin, 1989). Abrupt, unexpected manipulation of a phrase is more arresting to the performer than similar, yet carelessly performed, positions (Fromel, Vasendova, & Krapkova, 2000).

The creative aesthetic effect can be applied particularly well in creatively oriented PE lessons. By creating an aesthetic environment in physical education classes, learners can exhibit their individuality, express themselves freely, and also interpret the various inputs into personal elements.

**References**


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