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ARTICLE

Opening Minds: Aesthetic Engagement in the Language Arts

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We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before. We are interested in releasing diverse persons from confinement to the actual, particularly confinement to the world of techniques and skill training, to fixed categories and measurable competencies. We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet (Greene, 2001, p. 44).

Supporting Maxine Greene's call "to awaken" our perceptions through art, we, as English teacher educators, enjoy interdisciplinary approaches, which include connecting painting, music, film, and vintage radio programs to literature. A guiding purpose in our instruction is to promote aesthetic engagement for English and language arts teachers and students. When teachers, themselves, use their imaginations, they can better facilitate students' imaginative explorations during interactions with literature and art (Greene, 1993). Within a classroom community, aesthetic engagement fosters dialogue, where there is an integration of perspectives and an opening of minds (Dewey, 1934; Rosenblatt, 1978). Strongly advocating the pivotal role art and aesthetic engagement should have in the school curriculum to develop dialogic communities, Maxine Greene (2000) believes students should have repeated and varied encounters with art. Our discussion of aesthetic engagement offers classroom strategies and theoretical foundations for the efficacy of multimodal approaches to understanding and creating texts in the language arts (Albers, 2006). In schools, where learning is increasingly quantitatively measured according to the mastery of discrete, often de-contextualized skills and students evaluate their own worth according to standardized test scores, aesthetic engagement in the classroom awakens in students the value of their own thoughts and inquiry.

Theoretical Perspectives

Art is a communication and an action, and meaningful interactions with a painting, a sculpture, a ballet, a song, or a novel are achieved through aesthetic engagement. An artist, aesthetically engaged, invests him/herself in the chosen medium, communicating with it to create a work that embodies the essence of his/her vision (Dewey, 1934). An aesthetically engaged viewer of the art reciprocates through a re-creation of the artistic endeavor: "For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent" (Dewey, p. 54). Aesthetic engagement, which involves the integration of thought and feeling leading to appreciation, connects the individual to the community through a mutual understanding of viewpoints. In an aesthetic relationship "no such distinction of self and object exists" because in the experience "the two are so fully integrated that each disappears" (Dewey, p. 249). This new awareness of "union with one another in origin and destiny" (Dewey, p. 271) originates with the individuals' personal relationships with and through art. Aesthetic engagement facilitates the need for individuals to connect, and so this developing community continues to privilege the worth of its members. One does not lose personal identity within artistic union.

Aesthetic engagement leads to an enhancement of the self, not a denial of the self in favor of the community. Through aesthetic engagement, it is an enlightened self who then more actively participates in society:

just as it is the office of art to be unifying, to break through conventional distinctions to the underlying common elements of the experienced world, while developing individuality as the manner of seeing and expressing these elements, so it is the office of art in the individual person, to compose differences, to do away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being, to utilize oppositions among them to build a richer personality. (Dewey, p. 248)

By enabling personal change and growth, art nurtures more fully integrated individuals. Each encounter with art is a fresh opportunity for the individual to discover something new because evolving life experiences and social contexts contribute to different understandings at different times (Greene, 2001; Dewey, 1934). Aesthetic experiences with art can also foster a new awareness about everyday encounters and "may make less likely an unthinking acceptance of disembodied, technicist ways of being in the world" (Greene, 1984, p. 126). Just as multiple readings of a text further the relationship between the reader and the literature (Sumara, 1999), repeated engagements with art also allow multiple layers of meaning to emerge and be expressed.

In the process of aesthetic engagement, social contexts and influences are interactive and reciprocal, rather than occurring unilaterally. Commenting on the Whitney Museum's recent exhibit demonstrating Picasso's influence on 20th-century American art, a writer at *The Washington Post* states, "This show proves a crucial principle of contemporary art history: that the meaning of even the greatest work can depend as much on how it's used as on what it looks like—that a work becomes the kind of thing it is because of the social frameworks it fits into, as much as because of its aesthetics" ("Exhibit illustrates Picasso's influence," 2006, p. 6D). This journalist incorrectly separates social frameworks from aesthetics; in fact, the social context partially defines the nature of an aesthetic experience. One could further recognize that Picasso and 20th-century America mutually influenced each other; otherwise, art as communication would fail to engage aesthetically.

Art communicates meaning with a language that is beyond words. "Since art is the most universal form of language, since it is constituted, even apart from literature, by the common qualities of the public world, it is the most universal and freest form of communication" (Dewey, p. 270). Such dialogue is inherent to the aesthetic experience: "Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. The hearer is an indispensable partner. The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it" (Dewey, p. 106). The dialogic response entails action because the art itself "is a quality of doing and of what is done" (Dewey, p. 214). Artists anticipate this response as a means to initiate the relationship with the viewer. Theodore Gaillard (1999) observes how a painter and an author expect viewer/reader participation in the conversation begun through the picture and the novel's text. Paul Cezanne and Ernest Hemingway used similar techniques for engagement:

Cezanne would intentionally leave small areas of canvas blank in the midst of a sea of roofs or on the side of a hill, causing viewers to fill spaces with preconscious constructs of complementary line and color, subtly moving toward the substitution of impression and feeling for cognition. As he reveals in *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway began to incorporate a similar technique into his work.... "you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people *feel* something more than they understood" (Gaillard, 1999, pp. 67-68, Gaillard's italics).

The conversation, "the chain of speech communion," begins by inviting aesthetic engagement (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 84). In his story "Big Two-Hearted River" about returning from war, Hemingway does not mention the war, but prepares the blank textual canvas for the reader to insert his/her own perception and feelings (Gaillard, 1999).

Aesthetic engagement is this integration of thinking and feeling that engenders a "unity of experience" both for the artist and the recipient of the art (Dewey, p. 43). In the act of creation "for the feeling artist, thought is harnessed in service of emotion, for the thinking artist, emotion is a vehicle for demonstrating the prowess of thought" (Davis, 2005, p. 29). In art and in an aesthetic experience, production, perception, appreciation, and enjoyment "sustain" each other (Dewey, p. 47). Intensifying an empathetic understanding, people "must know what it is to move within paintings and among the masses of sculptures, to live in music, to attend to bodies in motion on a stage—not solely with eyes and mind, but with nerves and muscles and pulsing blood" (Greene, 2001, p. 203). Too often in our society and in schools, we separate the intellectual from the emotional and the creative works from the creative work of production and perception. We privilege the analytical and ignore how emotion, creativity, and thinking are inextricably interwoven into the fabric of our consciousness. To understand paintings as "illustrations of historical scenes, of literature, [and] of familiar scenes" or to value the art only according to techniques undermines aesthetic engagement to the same extent that an efferent understanding of text defines reading as the acquiring of superficial knowledge about plot, characters, and setting (Dewey, p. 199; Rosenblatt, 1978).

In schools, students are frequently taught analytical strategies "that point to surface features of text such as plot and theme without attention to the deeper practices of (critically and emotionally) engaging in a character's worldview" (Iftody, Sumara, & Davis, 2006, p. 8). Louise Rosenblatt observes, "efferent reading gives attention primarily to the referent alone; aesthetic reading places the experienced meaning in the full light of awareness and involves the selective process of creating a work of art" (p. 75). To separate means from ends negates the importance of engagement and instead focuses on measurable outcomes (Dewey, 1934). Contemplation, without enjoyment, results in an "anaemic conception of art," thus potentially rupturing the process leading to self-knowledge and meaningful, empathetic relationships with others (Dewey, p. 253).

Classroom Learning

Literature studies in school should cultivate aesthetic engagement and embrace multi-genre, interdisciplinary approaches because these practices support students' meaning-making desires. Students want to know more about themselves in relation to the world, and literature can be the vehicle facilitating new perspectives (Townsend, 2005). Life, itself, is

interdisciplinary. Jacqueline Brogan says that the disjointed narrative of Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) simulates the fragmentation of a Cubist painting, and Elizabeth Vaughn argues that Hemingway's word repetition replicates Picasso's pattern of geometric shapes (Narbeshuber, 2006). Juan Gris, in his collage *The Watch* (1912), incorporated texts of Apollinaire's poems "Le Pont Mirabeau" (1913) and "L'Enfer" (de Costa, 1989). Gris, primarily a painter, also wrote poetry. Our thoughts and daily interactions generally are not neatly compartmentalized; we make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas and events to establish coherence. Jerome Bruner (1990) notes how we innately "organize experience narratively" to make sense of our lives and that "culture soon equips us with new powers of narration . . . through the traditions of telling and interpreting" (pp. 79-80). Art provides the means for storytelling. Moreover, "[p]eople are constantly engaged in a process of negotiating the connection between their personal narratives and these dominant societal narratives" (Murray, 2003, p.99). Using such media as film, painting, music, and old-time radio in the literature classroom allows students to build connecting narratives that illuminate commonalities and differences that further their understanding of self in relation to social and cultural contexts. The social context of literary discussion also invites students' individual "perplexities and ponderings" to intersect within the classroom community, thus promoting the expression of aesthetic engagement and valuing it as worthwhile learning (Townsend, 2008).

Students' aesthetic engagement with a literary text parallels similar relationships the viewer or audience member has with a painting or a play. Applying a reader-response approach to artistic analysis, Colin Grigg (2003) supports the validity of multiple interpretations arising from individual perspectives:

Recent art critical theories have marked a rejection of a single, authoritative, reading of a work of art, and have given greater emphasis to the notion of the viewer as an active participant in the production of meaning; a change from a transmission to a response model. (p. 133)

The reader or viewer does not passively receive the text, but is encouraged to respond to it. Fran Claggett (2005) observes that like writing, reading is also "an act of interpreting and composing" (p. 10). Rosenblatt concurs that "[a]ny reading . . . requires some degree of 'writerly' activities from a reader" (p. 171). Just as learning to perceive aesthetically "emulates the operation" of the artist's initial composing (Dewey, p. 200), the reader also actively re-creates the text while reading, "creating a work of art" (Rosenblatt, p. 75). The relationship established through the communication between the author and the reader becomes the foundation for relationships between other readers of the text. From an "aesthetic stance" emerges "a humanistic concern for the relation of the individual literary event to the continuing life of the reader in all its facets—aesthetic, moral, economic, or social" (Rosenblatt, p. 161). Literature, with its medium "already formed by communication," surpasses all the other arts in its power to break "through the barriers that divide human beings" (Dewey, p. 244). Aesthetic reading, just like aesthetic engagement with other art, is not a solitary act.

Applications and Teaching Strategies

In the classroom community, aesthetic engagement and literacy development are interactive processes. With conversations to young children about art, teachers can help elementary students acquire the vocabulary to describe and to understand art (Danko-McGhee, 2006). Students can learn the language of a painting by seeing the painting as a text. Initiating a dialogue through questions, the teacher can relate art to students' experiences, so it has meaning for them (Toth, 1999). In a secondary school classroom, high school students began an introduction to a humanities course by examining a poster of Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884) while listening to the song "It's Hot Up Here" from the Broadway musical *Sunday in the Park with George* (Sondheim & Lapine, 1984), which is based on the painting. Through reading copies of the song lyrics and engaging in class discussion, students identified characters in the painting. With the lyrics and dramatic dialogue commingling, the staccato notes reinforcing the pointillism brushwork of the painting, and the evolution of a plot, students recognized that genres are not discrete categories, but instead can inform each other. Then students further participated in the creative process by writing a story or play about Pierre Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881). Writing a narrative connected to this painting is analogous to a hands-on activity in an art studio because both are "*authenticating the experience*" of aesthetic engagement (Danko-McGhee, 2006, citing Cole, 1994, p. 22).

After explaining this activity to Master's-level English Education pre-service teachers, we asked them to participate as secondary students, completing the assignment to understand better the integration of literacy and the arts. Instead of merely glancing at Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, they experienced the habit of carefully studying it and creatively engaging in it through adopting different perspectives of the characters in the painting and through expressing their own literary voices. Revealing her own aesthetic engagement, one graduate student chose to compose a poem:

The Veranda

A Nonchalant look, a tilted face
Straw hats with green stripes
A blue dress red and white in lace
News on the street
The gossipers speak
An adoring glance towards the one her heart seeks
While confronting his wife a man stands by her side
Two politicians talk not too far by her side
Mid-day coffee, a glass of wine
Grapes, ale, and bread for the lovers to dine
With hearts full of lust the folks at the table sigh
One looks upon the next with longing eyes.
The one being looked at looks away from the lover
Towards someone whose gaze follows through to another.
The heat creates passion for the folks on this porch
The night will bring forth other lights for the torch
The torch that will burn while the lovers fight
Over what happened at the Veranda before night.

Through completing this activity, these future educators appreciated an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates a variety of genres of composition, and they could then model for their prospective students how to *read* and *write* a painting: its language of form, color, and design. “Reading” a painting,” however, as Maxine Greene (1984) emphasizes, is only the initial step: “People must be intentionally empowered to go beyond such basics in order fully to perceive, to engage, to bring to life” (p. 128). Tina Chadha, who composed “The Veranda,” commented in her portfolio: “I really enjoyed this final assignment because it was the one with the least amount of limitations. It allowed me to experiment with the genre that I love best and it allowed me to express myself in the best way I know how.” Offering our students choices in their learning and opportunities to direct their own methods of inquiry leads to intellectual growth through making new connections, “perceptually, affectively, and cognitively” (Greene, 1995).

As Maxine Greene (2000) observes, “[e]xperiences with the arts and the dialogues to which they give rise may give the teachers and learners involved more opportunity for the authentic conversations out of which questioning and critical thinking and, in time, significant inquiries can arise” (p. 277). Aesthetic engagement comprises “the complementary and vital role of both emotion and cognition” in the learning processes (Wong, 2007, p. 202). Such uses of art in the classroom integrate critical thinking and creative inquiry, and schools can then become a venue for students’ information-seeking, sense-making, and wondering (Lampert, 2006; Lindfors, 1999).

Using a variety of media for aesthetic engagement in secondary classrooms not only creates exciting new perspectives for analysis, but it also liberates the teacher from managing students in a scripted curriculum to “empowering” them “to make increasing sense of their actually lived worlds” (Greene, 1986, p.72). After studying Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1594), eighth-graders recognized similar gender relationships in a 1951 episode of the *My Favorite Husband* radio program. When tenth-graders selected a song from a recent CD and could analyze the lyrics for meter, rhyme scheme, metaphor, onomatopoeia, assonance and alliteration, they could identify effectively these elements in an Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost poem. While reading Schaefer’s *Shane* (1949), students researched the Old West through the internet and documented sources in MLA format to create their own Western board games on such topics as the Pony Express, the Gold Rush, and the Oregon Trail. In teams, tenth-grade students presented Mark Antony’s funeral oration from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599), as a panel of their peers judged the performances. By watching *The Pearl of Death* (1944), a film starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, students not only compared and contrasted the actors’ portrayals with the depictions of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in the stories they read, but they also drew a plot diagram for the film and understood how a film creates suspense differently from a text through camera angles, lighting, and music. These types of activities nicely complement traditional approaches through lecture, note-taking, and discussion.

With new technologies, students often negotiate texts in less linear forms, but the development of multimedia literacies is not new to the aesthetic engagement people have enjoyed with literature for generations. Citing David Olson’s (1994) account of how the printed word on paper ushered in new ways of thinking and Shirley Brice Heath’s (2000) discussion of how “[t]he line between word and image is getting harder to draw,” Eve Beame (2003) argues that new technologies have created more varied means to communicate, so that children now have to understand “spatial cohesion as well as chronological structure” when they read (pp. xiii-xiv). Beame suggests that these new ways of reading impact how children create their own texts, “assuming the integration of image and word and supplying sound, elements of gesture and

movement, as they compose their own narratives” (p. xiv). Even so, the visual choices available through Microsoft Word and PowerPoint may limit the expression of students’ creativity compared to writing on paper. One child observed, “When it’s on paper you can set it how you want but on the computer you can’t. . . . When you’re writing [by hand] you’ve got more choices” (Burnett & Myers, 2006, p. 22). Training pre-service teachers in how to further their students’ electronic media literacy through the arts can help students to negotiate better, non-traditional print texts (LaMonde & Rogers, 2007).

Children’s aesthetic engagement in reading has often supported the integration of various genres. Children retell stories they have read, add their own variations, and re-enact the tales in dramatic performance. In Vivian Paley’s (1981) classroom, kindergartners acted out not only the stories they read, such as “Jack and the Beanstalk,” but also the ones they wrote. Through drawing, children can visually narrate previously read stories or originate new stories. As Thomas Newkirk (1989) has noted, drawing is a form of storytelling with its own visual language of conventions to show narrative action and exposition. Involvement with different artistic media allows expression of thought and feeling that “brings us into the heart of the artistic-aesthetic” (Greene, 1994, p. 503). Picture books attest to the successful integration of linear and nonlinear textual functions to tell stories: “The tension between the two functions creates unlimited possibilities for interaction between word and image in a picturebook” (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 37).

Before the advent of the internet, adults could successfully navigate such multidimensional, multimodal postmodern texts as Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1567), which references other texts such as Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (c. 1599 – 1601), parodies the language of sermons and legal documents, introduces different font styles, incorporates French, plays with the conventions of visual illustration, and gives directives to “Madam” reader for how to interact with the text. Electronic multimedia repackages the different genres through a new medium of access, thus manifesting in the 21st century a centuries-old technique of expressing thoughts and feelings through a variety of means, whether it be painting, sculpture, drama, poetry, dance, music, photography, film, radio, or television. It would thus be difficult to argue that *Tristram Shandy* belongs in the category of “less necessary or valuable older literate social practices” simply because new literacies available through technology exist (Albers & Harste, 2007, p. 7). Great literature, no matter the century of origin, has a timeless value in helping us access truth.

Over time the means of aesthetic engagement may have changed, but not the need for the engagement, and Maxine Greene’s scholarship has alerted us to the significant role of the arts in realizing the wholeness of our humanity. The desire for the artist to communicate his/her vision and for the recipient of the art to respond connects individuals to others’ perspectives. Aesthetic engagement helps us to define ourselves through social contexts and make meaning out of our lives in a community. Art and the art of literature enable us to construct the narrative. To relegate imagination, creativity, and the joy of discovery to the perimeters of our schools and society undermines the value of the individuals in our communities. Art leads to enlightenment by “bringing about the transformative moments of ordinary life that disclose the extraordinary” (Heid, 2005, p. 49). When we open ourselves to aesthetic engagement in the everyday, not just in reading a book or viewing a painting, we awaken our senses to previously hidden wonders.

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