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Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education by Maxine Greene

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BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Maxine Greene's *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education*. (2001). New York, NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia University. 238 pages. ISBN: 0-8077-4135-3.

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In *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, a collection of lectures to teachers presented at Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education, philosopher of education Maxine Greene addresses classroom teachers' practice, their questions, and their thinking about teaching and learning for aesthetic education. This text is a philosophical call to bring the arts into the classroom, deepening the experiences and animating a sense of self that connects a particular kind of engagement. Greene argues that "Aesthetic education ... is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to *notice what is there to be noticed*" (Greene, 2001, p. 6; emphasis mine). Effective teachers aim to foster awareness of whatever subject taught the seed of the acorn, the stem of a sentence, the struggle of a historical figure, the symmetry of an equation. For Greene, the role of art in our lives as well as in our classrooms and society is to awaken our imagination in order to see in new ways the world around us, and thus, see in new ways what it means to live in the world.

In this book, Greene seeks to develop a shared meaning of aesthetic education. She persuasively gives reasons to how aesthetics is important for those of us who teach because art can impact students' intellectual as well as emotional development. Greene argues intentional experiences that foster awareness and heightened consciousness are linked to our "cognitive understanding" and our capacity "to notice, to see, to hear, to attend" (p. 9). Through the use of the arts, we develop what Greene calls a "wide-awakeness," that is, a capacity to see nuances out of complexity, to focus on details, yet see still the whole instead of only the parts. In their apprehension of what they see, students will "in some sense be free to find their own voices, as they find their eyes and ears" (p. 11).

Greene defines aesthetic education as "education for more discriminating appreciation and understanding of the several arts" (p. 8). She makes the case for initiating young people into different experiences with diverse art forms to foster experiences and awaken their feelings, their questions, their interpretation. A teacher can elicit discussion about each of these states of experience, helping students find a language of thinking, feeling, wondering, listening—in short, toward a language of response to what is seen and heard, helping students make connections of emerging patterns, seeking what Greene calls "aesthetic moments" (p. 12). These moments leave their imprint upon minds and hearts as students learn to pay attention to what is being seen or heard. "Coming in contact with a work [of art] is like meeting another human being. . ." and can never occur without context. Opening ourselves to encounters with the arts awakens us, prepares us for deeper living because our imagination is at work, and with imagination, a possibility of our transformation (p. 16). The Lincoln Center Institute for Aesthetic Education is a venue for teachers to expand their apprehension, perceptions and imagination so when they teach their own students they are in "far better position to begin creating those conditions in the classrooms in which energies and preferences can be released" (p. 60). For many teachers who must don the hat of narrow, standardized, reductive teaching, Greene offers options to navigate towards more robust thinking and cultivation of imagination for our students.

The smallest insertion of art in classrooms can have a profound effect upon young people, who maybe seeing or hearing something for the first time, never to forget the affect of the experience. If teachers are intentional, argues Greene, they can use that opening to draw further attention, deliberate attention, to what is being seen or heard as part and parcel of the exploration and discovery that education worthy of its name promises for all young people.

Greene explores the facets of imagination and transformation, "Imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities" (p. 65). Imagination says Greene, allows us to "uncouple from the ordinary" and move beyond that of "true-false meanings" into more fertile and "urgent" understanding. "Truth does not have monopolistic jurisdiction," whereas art, Greene paraphrases Dewey, can lead us into "the goods of life [that] are matters of richness and freedom of meanings rather than of truth" (p. 67). Art pushes us to see beyond the ordinary, to grasp a perspective or puzzle over it, but never take it for granted. It is this taken-for-granted state that creeps into our life in the classroom, and which aesthetic experiences can shake loose, bringing a new energy into our students, and in us, as teachers. This is the impetus that helps us "uncouple from the ordinary," using new eyes to see and ears to hear. Through the use of art, teachers and students discover that

there is always more to be found, horizons to be breached, limits to be broken through always untapped possibilities. [In] a world so focused on objectives and results, efficiency, effectiveness, and the rest, I would lay

particular stress on what lies beyond the moment's grasp, on the uses of defamiliarizing the overly familiar (and thus invisible, inaudible) world. (p. 206)

Art leads us away from bifurcated and reductive thinking into the rich complexity of the world of ideas and imagination.

To look is not the same as to see; to hear is not the same as to listen. In the cacophony of school and daily life, we settle for looking and hearing. Inviting aesthetic experiences into our classrooms can awaken senses, both in our students and in us, and once awakened, looking becomes seeing; hearing becomes listening. This awakening allows us to become a participant, involved and engaged, with curiosity, with interest, and with feeling (p. 73). "The questions beat and thud and hang there. And the spaces of our experience become fuller and more complex and richer and more full of contradiction" (p. 94). Such an experience is anything but boring and dull.

Greene writes that "To be sunk in habitual routines, to be merely passive is...to miss an opportunity for awakening. But we as teachers take the chances the young do when we try to enable them to defamiliarize their familiar situation...to reflect on things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 98). It is these "things...that could be otherwise" that both pull on teachers (for teaching always changes both the teacher and students) and sometimes cause hesitation. What does it mean that things be *otherwise*? From what? Towards what?

For Maxine Greene, *otherwise* points towards a better social order, one of equity and fairness, openness and access for all. To imagine otherwise requires that we see and question and challenge *what is*. We live in a world that seems divorced from itself, full of greed (2008 economic recession), imperialistic engineering (wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), and a contentious, volatile argument over universal health care that predominantly is succeeding in only raising blood pressure, regardless of which side of the debate you are on. Teachers see the effects of these larger societal issues on students. Inequity and injustice are not left at the classroom door; students track in with them the injustices that loom over their lives. When we foster an inclination to openness, to wide-awakeness in our students (and in ourselves), we foster a way of imagining the otherwise Greene is talking about. Why do we have poverty? What difference in our lives would adequate health care bring? Raising these questions invites other questions, peeling the onion, as teachers call it, to dig deeper into challenging *what is*, and to imagine "alternatives to the given" (p. 122).

This is the power of art, to prompt discovery, "expanding the range of literacy" (p. 139). Greene explains that "Opening perspectives...enlarges the spaces—the perceptual, imaginative, and conceptual spaces—in which the young come in touch with and try to interpret their worlds" (p. 139).

Maxine Greene's lectures contained in this volume span over 25 years while she was the philosopher-in-residence of the Lincoln Center Institute. She gives all of us who seek to foster critical thinking and imagination in our students inspiration to continue our work, and the means of cultivating an education worthy of its name, where students and teachers learn about the world in its multiplicity of dimensions and to imagine otherwise, which is, in reality, a world that exists in the future that will be inhabited, and forged, by the very students we are teaching today. This is not the schooling of taken for granted, static learning, "the predictable and quantifiable." (p.7) For our challenged planet will require an education to forge robust thinkers and participants who have the capacity to use reason along with imagination to live in the world as we are leaving it to them. Isn't this legacy of imagining the world otherwise, to awaken to possibilities and "find new visions, new ways of living in the fragile human world" an aim for each of us with our students? (p. 207)

References

Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar; the Lincoln Center Institute lectures on aesthetic education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.