

Aesthetic Literacy Across The Curriculum: A Conversation

“Sometimes I think that what we want to make possible is the living of lyrical moments, moments at which human beings (freed to feel, to know, and to imagine) suddenly understand their own lives in relation to all that surrounds.” (Maxine Greene)

“Do students recognize the aesthetic features of inquiry in science and in the social studies, or do they separate the aesthetic from what they study in general and assign it to the realm of the arts alone? What would we need to teach in each of the fields students study to help them understand the role that the aesthetic plays in a particular field?” (Elliot Eisner)

What We Talk About When We Talk About Aesthetic Literacy

- β More than the arts
- β A form of integrative learning that combines knowledge, imagination, feeling, and skills
- β “Conceptual awareness” that enables “diverse persons to break through the cotton wool of daily life and to live more consciously.” (Greene)
- β A literacy that applies across disciplines

Goals For Student Learning

1. *The aesthetically literate student will be able to identify and analyze aesthetic elements that shape understanding and response.* At the most basic levels, this means familiarity with the vocabulary and concepts used to understand, analyze and respond aesthetically; it means knowing what is meant by “rhythm” and having a language for talking about, say, color. But beyond knowledge of terms, aesthetic literacy implies a facility with how language is used to communicate aesthetic experience.
2. *The aesthetically literate student will develop a framework for response that is both personal and critical.* John Dewey once pointed out that the opposite of aesthetic is anesthetic; the opposite of an aesthetically literate judgment or evaluation might be “I know what I like.” It is not that learners avoid preferences; quite the contrary, an aesthetically literate learner should be able to develop a personal aesthetic and articulate critical perspectives. But the goal is to communicate more than simple reactive bias. Learners should develop nuanced criteria for aesthetic judgments and characterizations, understanding that their preferences speak through decisions that are informed by experience and knowledge. Indeed, judgment and evaluation should be seen as tools for achieving and sharing individual and collective understanding.
3. *The aesthetically literate student will cultivate and respect different ways of seeing, rooted in different cultures, value systems, and historical contexts.* This is almost a commonplace, but it carries the weight of identity, culture, ethics, and values. An aesthetically literate learner should understand that there are no absolutes when it comes to beauty and perception; different people perceive and understand beauty in different ways. This includes the recognition of cultural preferences within and between groups, as well as the historical, social, and political subtexts of aesthetic interpretation. There are ethical and political implications to aesthetic understanding; ways of seeing and personal choice are never value-free.
4. *The aesthetically literate student will understand that disciplinary perspectives inform and are informed by the aesthetic.* Physicists speak of beautiful theories, mathematicians speak of elegant proofs, and rhetoricians speak of artful arguments. Aesthetics permeates all disciplines and ways of thinking. Understanding is advanced through aesthetic interpretation, and the aesthetically literate student will embrace the beauty of all fields. The aesthetic dimensions of disciplines are related to understanding, and many fields share common (or similar) vocabularies in the aesthetic realm.
5. *The aesthetically literate student will appreciate and actively pursue aesthetic engagement that deepens and enriches experience.* One way to think of this is the adage, “stop and smell the roses.” Aesthetic literacy helps us to experience things at a deep level, to transcend the commonplace. This harkens back to Greene’s lyrical moments, or Dewey’s call “to break through the crust of conventional and routine consciousness.” It also suggests that learners should know themselves well enough to know what affects them, and in turn be able to appreciate and articulate the aesthetic process.

“Aesthetic literacy is not merely a call for understanding (as if understanding were ever “mere”), but an incitement to action. All literacy (aesthetic, linguistic, quantitative, etc.) is instrumental, and aesthetically literate learners should be able to use understanding to make change. Additionally, these outcomes (and students’ understanding of them) should be seen as developmental, compounding and increasing exponentially with each stage of learning. The literacy of a student’s fourth year should be more useful and complex than the literacy of her first year.” (Bond, Gale, Ho and Hutchings - Draft)

Opportunities

- β Aesthetic literacy can be a focus for cross-disciplinary discussion about students’ educational experience, asking how students develop these more integrative capacities, and how teaching and curriculum can foster such capacities.
- β Discussion of aesthetic literacy is an opportunity to ask about the place of more personal, emotional kinds of learning in the college curriculum.
- β Aesthetic literacy can open up possibilities for more integrative assessment.
- β Elliot Eisner: “The durable outcomes of schools are not to be found in short-term instrumental tasks. Such outcomes must penetrate more deeply. When school programs neglect attention [to the aesthetic], they neglect the very satisfactions that reside at the core of education.”

“The problems of life are much more like the problems encountered in the arts. They are problems that seldom have a single correct solution; they are problems that are often subtle, occasionally ambiguous, and sometimes dilemma-like. One would think that schools that wanted to prepare students for life would employ tasks and problems similar to those found outside of schools. This is hardly the case. Life outside of school is seldom like school assignments-- and hardly ever like a multiple-choice test.” (Elliot Eisner)

Questions For Discussion

- β What is your interest in this topic? Why is the idea of aesthetic literacy important or interesting to you?
- β What role does the aesthetic play in your field, and how could or should it contribute to students’ field-linked understanding?
- β What challenges or concerns might be raised by the idea of fostering students’ aesthetic literacy?
- β How do you teach toward the outcomes of aesthetic literacy. Are there particularly fruitful pedagogies?
- β How might aesthetic literacy be assessed?

“We want, if you like, to expand the range of literacy: offering the young new ways of symbolizing, new ways of structuring their experience, so they can see more, hear more, make more connections, embark on unfamiliar adventures into meaning.” (Maxine Greene)