

We All Respond to the Aesthetic

Pam Stephens

Ernest Boyer's human commonalities remind us that we all respond to the aesthetic. Notice that the commonality does not say "respond to the same aesthetic." Indeed, aesthetics is highly personal and varies widely from culture to culture, place to place, time to time, and person to person. This article provides some hints about how you as a student-teacher can incorporate aesthetics into your curriculum in a way that will engage, not overwhelm, your students.

What Is Aesthetics?

The word *aesthetics* derives from the Greek word *aisthesis* which means "recognition of the senses." From a traditional stance, aesthetics looks into the psychological aspects of beauty. In bygone eras when art was clearly defined by specific criteria, it was much easier to determine what objects could be classified as art. Today's art world, however, defies a singular definition of art. This broadened parameter opens doors to questioning the validity of objects as art and their makers as artists. Exploring aesthetics poses big questions that rarely produce concrete right or wrong answers. Indeed, aesthetics requires rigorous and deep thinking—the kind of thinking that helps to develop critical thinkers.

Your Role: Facilitator

First, make sure that you have a firm grasp of the discipline of aesthetics. Keep in mind that the questions you ask should be broad, open-ended, and allow for multiple responses. Many times the questions developed by students can be the most important part of aesthetic inquiry. As a teacher candidate, it is your charge to guide students towards an accessible understanding of aesthetics. With this in mind, contemplate objects that each of your students knows well.

The Bread Crumb Technique

The temptation with aesthetics teaching is to immediately ask if an object is art or whether a certain person can be an artist. There are at least three problems with this approach:

1. The questions "Is it art?" and "Is the person who created this an artist?" assume that students have an accurate and personal definition for the terms art and artist. Most students will, but unless the definitions have been refined, they are usually flawed. Determine whether students have sound definitions before asking these questions.
2. Both can be answered with a

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simple yes or no. While these questions can and should be posed at some point, it is better to begin with open-ended questions that provide opportunities for closer investigation, deeper thinking, and multiple responses.

3. Both questions are so generic that either question could be asked of any object or person. Develop open-ended questions that are derived from specific art objects. A good way to start aesthetic inquiry is through the practice of comparing objects. Begin with what students already know and then offer bread crumbs that guide them to a logical conclusion.





Contemplating the aesthetics of interior spaces helps students develop a sense of what is art and who can be an artist. Photo by Shannon Sweny-Stephens, Northwest Independent School District, Trophy Club, Texas.

Lower Grades

You will need a photograph of a well-designed table, desk, chair, or cabinet. Search online for museums that have furniture collections and compile a selection to show the class. Ask students to describe their school desk, chair, or a classroom bookshelf. List the descriptive words on the board and segue into aesthetics questioning. Ask students where the object is located, where it is used, how original it is, and who might have designed it. Next, show the furniture piece that you have selected from a museum collection. Repeat the same format that you used for the first inquiry. When students have completed the second list, compare it to the first. How are the objects the same? How are they different? Why would the

second object be in a museum? Is there a time when the student's desk, chair, or classroom cabinet would be in a museum? Why?

Extension: Have students design a school desk, chair, or cabinet that is functional, but could also be considered an art object.

Middle Grades

The same lesson can be taught in middle school if the activity involves a more complex comparison. Instead of comparing a single object to another, describe and compare the entire classroom space to an artistically designed interior space. You will need a photograph of a well-designed interior space. Use the image search function to find photographs or draw-

ings of well-designed interior spaces. How does the aesthetically pleasing interior invite the viewer to enter or use the space? How is the second space a better design? How are interior designers artists?

Extension: Make a blueprint of a well-designed and aesthetically pleasing art classroom, or create a three-dimensional room that is inviting and has aesthetic appeal.

Upper Grades

The same format can be used in high-school classrooms if the content is more challenging. Instead of comparing interior spaces, consider exterior spaces or building exteriors. You will need a photograph or poster of an exterior space or building. Search online for images of well-designed parks or go to www.greatbuildings.com to find a building exterior to examine. Compare the exterior campus or school's exterior to park designs or contemporary architecture. How can the design of an exterior space or building attract visitors? How can architects be artists?

Extension: Use software such as Google SketchUp to create an aesthetically appealing exterior space or school building that could be considered art.

In Closing

Aesthetic inquiry is not a one-time lesson; rather, aesthetic investigations should be included in all meaningful art lessons. The ideas listed here are introductory activities. As you become more familiar with your students and feel more confident in leading open-ended art explorations, expand the scope of aesthetic discussions to include more diverse objects and artists from various times, places, and cultures. 🌀

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