Aesthetics in Art Education

Antonio Fernetti

East Carolina University
Abstract
Since the beginning of DBAE, many art teachers find themselves confused as to what ways they may implement aesthetics into their art curriculum successfully. Much of this confusion centers on the often enigmatic aesthetic jargon of scholars. There is a need for a more clear rationale for aesthetics and incorporating aesthetics into art education curriculums. Provided in this paper are two similar frameworks for successfully implementing aesthetics into art curriculums. In conclusion, the article discusses the discrepancy between aesthetics being taught implicitly or explicitly in the art classroom. The author gives an example from his own art classroom for implementing a simple aesthetic activity that is taught explicitly.
Introduction

Since the inception of Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) as the leading art education curriculum guide roughly thirty years ago, there has been much confusion on the part of classroom teachers as to how to incorporate the four separate disciplines. This is especially true of aesthetics. This is partly due to the fact that it is not easy to define the term let alone incorporate the broad implications that it encompasses in the art classroom. Aesthetics is also a philosophy. In fact, many philosophers tread lightly when daring to deal with this subject (Gray, 1987). Karen Hamblen and Camille Galanes (1991), explained dealing with aesthetics in a metaphor. They likened dealing with aesthetics to a dilemma that faced the character Radar on one episode of the television series MASH. The authors go on to explain that in this episode, Radar has a crush on one of the nurses who knows a lot about classical music. Radar, of course, knows nothing about classical music. In order to impress the nurse, Radar enlists the help of the MASH doctors, Hawkeye and B.J. The two doctors tell Radar that whenever the nurse asks him about classical music he should simply raise his hand into the air, look off into the distance and say “Ah-h-h, Bach”. Hamblen and Galanes (1991) contend that many art educators may have a similar reaction when dealing with aesthetics, and hope that the conversation goes no farther. Dwaine Greer, the man who coined the term DBAE in his paper Discipline-Based Art Education: Approaching Art as a Subject of Study (1984), himself explains what instructors need in order to teach aesthetics in a daunting way. Greer (1984), states that “The acquisition of the thought process of aestheticians, their procedures as they consider the question of how other levels of meaning are presented in
works of art, determines the sequence of instruction needed to acquire the lense of the
discipline of aesthetics” (p. 214). Furthermore, in the *Discipline-Based Art Education
Handbook*, Stephen Dobbs (1991) describes aesthetics as:

Aesthetics—People reflect upon the experience of art, its impact and meaning.
Such judgments depend upon an understanding of art’s meaning and value, the
nature of the art object, and the elements that make the experience of art unique.
Children as well as philosophers and social scientists are curious about and raise
such questions; they are studying, even with different vocabularies, the discipline
of aesthetics (p. 22).

Again, after reading vague and enigmatic statements like the examples provided above,
many art educators may raise their hands into the air, look off into the distance, and say
“Ah-h-h, aesthetics” (Galanes, & Hamblen, 1991). Unfortunately, because aesthetics is
often misunderstood, it is often misrepresented by educators whose task it is enlighten the
general public about the world of art (Langford, 1986). The purpose of this paper is to
provide a more clear explanation of aesthetics and how it relates and can be included in
art education.

*Two Frameworks for Aesthetics in the Art Classroom*

To be sure, aesthetics is not easily defined and explained as to how it relates to
art education. The best one can hope to do is simplify. A simple definition might be
best described by Lankford (1986) when he states, “Basically, aesthetics is asking
questions and searching for answers about the nature of art”. Another explanation of
aesthetics is the critical reflection on our experience of art, whether it is dealt with from
the art producers, appreciators, historians, or the critic’s direction (Crawford, 1987). In
this sense, aesthetics in the art room would seem be incorporated into the teaching of other art disciplines. Donald Crawford (1987) proposes that aesthetics be viewed through five different concepts in relation to art. These concepts include the art object, appreciation and interpretation, critical evaluation, artistic creation, and the cultural context. In relation to the art object, aesthetics concerns how we identify and describe its form, content and meaning. Questions will arise as to the nature of the art objects existence that require inquiry. Many traditional forms of art are representations of other objects, but many modern art forms are abstract, not literal imitations, and may be real things in their own right. Some artwork is conceptual and may not even be a physical object. Other questions may surface such as artwork in a series, or whether or not an artist sketch can be considered a work of art in its own right. Similarities and differences between different art forms can be explored, such as between printmaking and painting.

In regards to appreciation, aesthetics surpasses simply enjoying looking at art and includes understanding its meaning. Most art cannot be viewed simply through its formal aspects to gain a full understanding (Crawford, 1987). For example, looking at Van Gogh’s The Potato Eaters can be viewed through its literal qualities, but the artist was trying to express a meaning in a social context. According to Edmund Burke Feldman (1992), looking at artwork is not a passive activity. Questions as to what makes one interpretation better than another, whether the intensions of the artist is important to interpreting work correctly, or how to decide between competing interpretations deserve inquiry (Crawford, 1987). Aesthetics seen through the lense of critical evaluation is tricky. Questions are asked whether aesthetic judgments about art can be supported with objective reasons. However, aesthetics through critical judgment should not be avoided.
The distinction between an explanation of why a student likes a painting and the justification as to why a student thinks it is good are really fundamental to aesthetics even if the issue of objectivity and personal value judgments remain unresolved. Aesthetics investigated through creating art provide opportunities to question what art making is (Crawford, 1987). What separates different forms of art? What makes making art in the classroom different than say writing cursive, or doodling? Why can’t a well-designed toaster be considered a work of art? Can a paint-by-number painting be considered art? Exploring notions about some art requiring rules and techniques, while other forms require innovation and imagination should be considered (Crawford, 1987). Other questions about the creative experience itself can be investigated. For example, why do people choose to make art? Are they trying to tell a story, or do they just like to express their feelings, or is it a mixture? Specific issues such as how important an artists name is in relation to artistic creation can be discussed. This can be investigated by discussing art forgeries. Finally, aesthetics approached through a cultural context falls on the premise that art does not exist in a vacuum. The acceptance and rejection of art forms is affected by the culture they spring from. Aesthetic inquiry through cultural contexts can be fostered by raising questions about levels of meaning attributed to works of art that are influenced by the cultural setting. What religious or ideological forces are at play? Is art used for propaganda, or advertising? Discussions can take place about whether art can be seen as immoral (Crawford, 1987).

In a similar and perhaps simpler manner, Dwaine Greere (1987) proposed that aesthetics could be incorporated into art education through two modes, content and inquiry. Under content, aesthetics can be approached in four different areas. These
include experience, works of art, intent, and value. Direct sensory experience is the starting point for aesthetics. Aesthetic experience is limited to the immediate sensory reaction to works of art and confined to student’s individual feelings. The second area of content in aesthetics deals with the nature of works of art. Whether there can be a definition for art at all is really a moot point. However, most school age students tend to value traditional modes of art that are representational (Greere, 1987). Under this area, the opportunity exists to broaden the student’s horizons by questioning whether representational art is a truth or an idea. This small discussion could raise the student’s level of aesthetic awareness in a big way. The third area of content is artistic intent. At some point, students will become aware that someone made the art they are looking at. With this realization also comes the awareness that the artist that made the work imposed some type of order on the materials. Under this area of content instructors may help students define the formal qualities of artwork. The fourth and final area under content is artistic value. In this area, questions may be asked about what artworks are judged better than others and how we are to decide. Here judgments should not be confined to formal aspects, but other factors as well. Aesthetic inquiry takes place in a less formal or evaluative setting. When students are responding to work in a historical or critical context, aesthetic questions can be asked that will raise the level of responses students make. For example, when viewing different portrait paintings of George Washington, it would be easy to ask which portraits depict the real man? The students might be asked whether or not the artist enhanced Washington’s appearance, and if so, why would the artist choose to do this (Greere, 1987)?
Conclusion

Indeed, aesthetics can seem overwhelming to the art educator. The frameworks that are mentioned above are presented in a way that incorporates aesthetics with other artistic disciplines, which I believe makes it easier to tackle. These frameworks suggest ways to teach and facilitate aesthetic questions implicitly and explicitly. However, teaching aesthetics as a discipline is not without its detractors. James U. Gray (1987) contends that teaching aesthetics is already implicitly taught through the other art disciplines and that teaching it explicitly or with singular attention creates an unnecessary diversion towards an artificial area for teachers to study in depth. Gray (1987) also implies that teaching aesthetics as a separate subject will turn teachers off entirely and this may lead to them ignoring it altogether. I can certainly see his point. In fact, many art teachers most certainly engage in aesthetic reasoning with their students without even realizing they are doing so. However, I don’t believe that explicitly taught aesthetics should be ignored. One rather simple and less formal way that I incorporate aesthetics explicitly in my own high school art classroom is through, as Greere would describe it, the nature of works of art. I have a program that I call “Is it Art or Not”. I conduct these lessons twice a month. These lessons usually take about a half an hour to conduct. In each of these lessons the students are shown a single slide of an object. The objects that I choose are sometimes traditional artwork, abstract art, and sometimes objects that would not traditionally fit the definition of “art” such as appliances, automobiles, or advertisements. The students are instructed to write one paragraph explaining why they think the object is art or not. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the students should be as free and open in their ideas, but must explain or back up their opinions. I make it a
point to tell the students that there are no wrong answers. The students are usually very enthusiastic about expressing their opinions, and this assignment usually garners great aesthetic classroom discussion. As a result, the students are engaged in questioning the nature of art, and their own feelings and values they hold about art.
Bibliography


