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ARTISTIC WAYS OF KNOWING: REALIZING THE ARTIST WITHIN EVERY STUDENT

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The young dancer arches her arm overhead with eyes focused above, seemingly searching the sky for a favorite star. She is keenly aware of her movement as she interprets her dance. The teenage violinist intently plays a musical passage over and over in practice, carefully listening to gauge dynamics that match expressive intent. The artist visually perceives an apple while creatively transforming it into an intricate line drawing extending what the eye sees into what the artist imagines. Imagination is also at play as several actors improvise a scene depicting people waiting for a bus, each enjoying the dynamic of shared spontaneity.

These students are all thinking, perceiving, and creatively interpreting as artists. Those of us who work in the arts can easily relate to the behaviors of these students as they work through their particular arts area. The dancer combines body awareness with interpretive movement. The violinist realizes the importance of practice in working towards fine-tuning his technical skills to mesh with his interpretive ideas. The artist expands and extends the simple apple to create a unique artwork. The actors realize the artistic dynamic of interacting through emotion and imagination. This is normal behavior in the arts. Our task is to acquaint those in the academic areas with the cognitive/perceptual functioning at work in the artistic process to realize the value of including this artistic thinking in the curriculum.

If we strip away the technical particulars that specifically define each arts area, we arrive at the essential underpinnings of how artists think and perceive through the artistic process. These

“artistic ways of knowing” describe the perceptual and cognitive processes inherent in working through the arts. An understanding of these processes can serve as a starting point to devise curricula that can help every student think as an artist. [\[i\]](#)

These Artistic Ways of Knowing are:

- *Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination* – to perceive and differentiate through the senses with acute awareness.
- *Metaperception* – to internally manipulate perceptions and emotions while making interpretive decisions.
- *Creative Interpretation* – to rework and refine interpretive decisions using the elements of perceptual discrimination and metaperception.
- *Dynamic of Behavior and Performance/Product* – to communicate a creative interpretation aesthetically through performance (music, dance, drama) or react to an artistic product (visual arts).
- *Critiquing*- to evaluate oneself or others with artistic discrimination [\[ii\]](#)

As we work through the normal artistic process, we can see how these different ways of knowing bring sensory and emotional depth as well as qualitative breadth to the thinking process.

Perceptual Discrimination and Awareness

Artistic knowing begins with fine-tuned sensory awareness. Those working through any arts domain truly pay attention to what surrounds them, delineating details that intrigue them. Elliot Eisner describes the importance of qualitative awareness of the world:

There is quite a difference between listening and hearing, between touching and feeling. What we should want to do over the course of our lifetime is to increasingly refine each of these abilities to whatever degree we and our culture can make possible. We need to develop critical abilities to differentiate, to distinguish, to recognize, and to make distinctions between the many qualities that constitute our world. [\[iii\]](#)

Eisner describes the uppermost level of this differentiation as “connoisseurship” using the example of a tailor who can tell by running a hand across a piece of cloth that it is 86% silk, 1% wool and the balance of cotton or rayon fiber.

Across the arts, music students develop detailed aural discrimination of rhythm patterns, melodic shapes, and tonal colors. Visual artists perceive the world with acuity, noticing dimensions of

space, color, and texture that go unnoticed by their peers. Dance students are increasingly aware of intricate body movement, isolating movement to shoulders, waist, and spine. Drama students observe behavior with a fine eye, internalizing the emotion, movement, and interactions of people they view.

Metaperception

Metaperception describes the inner manipulation and monitoring of senses and emotions that take place through the artistic interpretive process. It is the artistic parallel to metacognition, a term used to describe mental monitoring in cognitive thinking and problem solving. [iv] This internal functioning is described in different terms across education and the arts. Those in aesthetic education describe it as aesthetic knowing or thinking with an aesthetic sense. In the arts it is described as qualitative intelligence, visual thinking, qualitative responsiveness or knowing within, and virtualization.[v]

Metaperception begins with fine-tuned perceptual discrimination, molding what is realized through the senses with emotional intent. The artist experiments with interpretive ideas, working back and forth from inner sensing to active work until a creative interpretation is formed from this artistic inner-outward process.

At the simplest level, a young child pays attention to how she is moving as though through mud, realizing inwardly how she feels and adjusting movement and expression to match. At the professional level, the actor prepares for performance through relaxed meditation to inwardly realize the character.

Creative Interpretation

As one works metaperceptively through an arts medium, the expressive reworking of ideas grows into an artistic interpretive process that results in a unique creative interpretation. A creative interpretation may be a spontaneous drama improvisation, a carefully polished musical performance, or an inventive textile work. Creative interpretation describes the process of communicating personal ideas to others through a particular arts medium.

The process of developing a creative interpretation requires reworking bits and pieces of ideas – “glimpses” that eventually come together to become a unique creation. The artist working on a painting may make numerous sketches of ideas that transfer bit by bit onto canvas. The musician

reworks “chunks” of a piece to find the appropriate tempo, mood, dynamic that interprets the intended emotion of the music. The dancer visualizing movement inwardly, transferring these ideas onto the dance floor, a phrase at a time. The actor analyzes the script and elements of the character multiple ways to develop the unique characterization that “works.”

Dynamic of Behavior and Performance/Product

The musician, dancer and actor communicate an interpretation to an audience through a performance. The audience experiences the performance, sharing in the interpretive process. The mutual aesthetic experience of audience and performer creates the dynamic of performance. In the visual arts, we have all experienced being drawn to a painting or sculpture sensing details and relating to it aesthetically, again creating the same type of dynamic between the artwork and the viewer.

In drama, Courtney describes this dynamic as a cyclical process between the player and the audience: as the player becomes more aware of what the audience is perceiving, the audience more closely connects with the player’s interpretation.[\[vi\]](#)

There are those who react to performance or art through an insightful critique or who exhibit artistic sensitivity but may not be an outstanding performer in class or on stage. These aesthetic behaviors in reaction to art may predict the future critic or outstanding teacher, director, or choreographer, able to translate artistic ideas to others through words.

Critiquing

The artistic process is not complete without the self-assessment of one’s work as well as the ability to critique others, showing understanding of the art form.

The importance of understanding beyond “doing” or production is widely recommended across the arts literature. [\[vii\]](#) There is nothing more rewarding than seeing students you have worked through the artistic process in any arts domain sharing ideas through constructive critique with their peers.

Critiquing professional live performances or professional art exhibits opens up golden opportunities for students to thrive in describing their reactions to these experiences in words verbally and on paper. Developing this artistic vocabulary helps them describe what they do in the arts to others and pushes them farther in understanding the intricacies of their craft.

Putting It Together

So often we find ourselves on the defensive in discussions of the role of the arts in school curricula, seeking out evidence of raising scores in math and science as a justification for their presence in the curriculum. There are numerous studies attempting to link special forms of arts education with learning that transfers to non-arts learning (reading, math, test scores, spatial reasoning). However, a pivotal set of 10 meta-analysis reviews by Winner and Hetland did not find conclusive evidence of these causal relationships.^[viii] Winner contends that we need to understand more about what goes in teaching in the arts and the level of learning achieved by that arts instruction. “Does experience in the arts change students’ minds so that they can approach the world as an artist would?”^[ix]

The discussion of “what goes on” inwardly through metaperception and outwardly through creative interpretation and performance in the arts depicts a high level of cognitive/perceptive thinking and learning not seen in the academics. Rather than focusing on how the arts can be used to promote learning in non-arts areas, we need to change direction to promote the value of having every child in every classroom learn to reach the level of “thinking like an artist.”

[i] Haroutounian, J. (2014). *Arts talent ID: A framework for the identification of talented students in the arts*. Unionville, NY: Royal Fireworks Press, p. 9

[ii] *Artistic Ways of Knowing* was developed by J. Haroutounian in 1995.

[iii] Eisner, E. W. (1986). Appreciating children’s aesthetic ways of knowing: An interview with Elliot Eisner by T. Buescher. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. 10 (1), p. 9.

[iv] Haroutounian, J. (2002). *Kindling the Spark: Recognizing and Developing Musical Talent*. New York: Oxford University Press, xv.

[v] Moody, W. (Ed.) (1990). *Artistic intelligence: Implications for education*. NY: Teachers College Press; Costa, A. (Ed.) (1991). *Developing minds: A resource for teaching thinking*.

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education, Part II. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Courtney, R. (1990). *Drama and intelligence: A cognitive theory*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.

[vi] Courtney, R. (1990). *Drama and intelligence: A cognitive theory*.

[vii] Gardner, H. (1994). *The arts and human development*. NY: Basic Books; Taylor, P. (2006).

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[viii] Winner, E. & Hetland, L. (Eds.) The arts and academic achievement: What the evidence shows. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 34 (3-4), 3-307.

[ix] Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema, S., & Sherican, K. (2007). Studio thinking: The real benefits of visual arts education, p. 4.



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