

## **Art and Human Potential**

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Deal and Peterson (1990) recognize that culture-building theories are difficult to implement. After suggesting general ways to strengthen school cultures, they write, "Easy to say and hard to do" (p. 90). In other words, each school has a unique culture, and attempts to shape or strengthen it will meet with specific difficulties that can only be anticipated and addressed by those within the school. Consequently, school culture literature has been limited to discussing the importance of the principal's culture-building role and describing principals who have effectively shaped their school cultures. This article goes beyond these general discussions by describing how principals could use "aesthetic experiences" to shape and strengthen almost any school culture.

### What are Aesthetic Experiences?

To promote self-understanding and reflection among graduate students in educational leadership classes, I use 20-30 minute "aesthetic experiences." These are activities students bring to class for the purpose of discussing how we are moved by a work of art or inspired by a profound idea. After students present something that moves or inspires them, the class engages in a free-flowing discussion of their reactions. Because this is a leadership class, the activity concludes with the question, "What does this have to do with leadership?"

The reason for doing aesthetic experiences is not apparent; so, before the semester begins, I send a letter explaining why we do them. First, I explain that aesthetic experiences foster leadership learning. The aesthetic perspective on leadership states: "Managers confront human vice; leaders cultivate human virtue." Leadership involves asking people to reach for their human potential. It is about helping people find their nobility, generosity, compassion, love, and caring for others. One way to do this is to

experience and explore human creativity. We reach our potential as we develop our aesthetic sensibilities, and share them with others.

Second, I explain that aesthetic experiences are not confined to the “high arts” of poetry, opera, foreign films, etc. To make this point I ask students to recall a time when they were shopping for clothes. Didn’t they see items they would never buy, even if they fit perfectly? That was their sense of aesthetics at work. I ask them to recall a time when their heads turned as they admired a passing car. Why did they want to look at that car? That was their sense of aesthetics at work. These examples illustrate that our sense of aesthetics permeates our lives. It is fundamental and basic to human nature, not something reserved for those with extensive cultural experiences and sensitivities.

To illustrate the aesthetic experience possibilities, I bring a popular work of art to the first class. It might be a television show, a song, or a poem. After this first experience, I schedule students who volunteer to bring experiences they want to share. To help them consider the possibilities, I distribute a handout listing common themes from art and literature.

(I list the themes at the end of this article. This list might be used as sidebar.)

Students have been eager to bring experiences to class, and I have been gratified by what they have shared. For example, one student read from her childhood journal. Another showed a video of Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream* speech. Another read the children’s book, *I’ll Love You Forever*. Others have brought in poems, songs, professional correspondence, and video clips of different types. Still, others brought in materials and supplies so we could create something of our own in class.

Engaging in all these activities has deepened students’ sense of seriousness, camaraderie and commitment to the course. One student posted this to the class electronic bulletin board:

Aesthetic experiences have been a highlight in this class. Yes, they break up the ho-humness of the typical graduate class, but they provoke so much more. These experiences have been sharings of our spirits and souls – something many of us have trouble doing and something we didn’t even realize we were doing.

Each experience is unique, so each one results in completely different answers to the question, “What does this have to do with leadership?” Sometimes the most unlikely experiences lead to deep insights.

For example, one student brought a plate of sushi for an aesthetic experience. When I learned what he had brought, and I remember thinking, “This has no connection to leadership.” I was wrong.

This particular experience evoked strong student feelings – feelings straight from the gut. Some students had eaten sushi before, but others had not. Of those who had not eaten it before, some were willing to try it in class. These students were visibly concerned about eating raw fish, and it took a long time for them to eat the few morsels they had on their plates. Another set of reactions was captured by the student who said, “There isn’t enough beer in the world to get me to eat one of those.”

When we discussed what this experience had to do with leadership, two important ideas emerged. First, some students were confronting a personal limitation. Some of them reluctantly tried the sushi, but others could not. What better way for class members to be reminded that we all have limitations? For every one of us, there are things we will not do, places we cannot go, no matter what. This is an important leadership lesson. Second, we discussed that students felt either included or excluded by this activity -- again, an important understanding for leaders.

Experiences like this have taught me that the activity can take many forms. The most important factors are the sincerity with which the person makes the aesthetic offering, and the willingness of group members to participate and reflect. Because students volunteer to share these experiences, other class members have always been respectful and have given an effort that reciprocates the sharing of the presenter.

### Adaptations for Building School Culture

At the end of each semester, I ask whether or not aesthetic experiences are appropriate for this class. One student wrote:

I have enjoyed the experiences very much and feel they are an essential part of this course. They bring out the innermost feelings about our teaching and could be used to bring out students’ feelings. Principals could also utilize the experiences to develop a team spirit during teacher meetings.

Other students have made this same point. Let's examine how this activity can serve the purposes of a principal who wants to shape and strengthen school culture. Why would principals use aesthetic experiences with their staffs? What purposes might they serve?

One of the purposes I want for my students may also apply in school settings. In the class letter, I write:

I hope the aesthetic experiences are so rich that they cause us to reach into the depths of our humanity. And when we do this, we will see more clearly why we have chosen to be educators. Unless we have an appreciation for our human potential, we cannot help others reach theirs, which is what education is all about.

Aesthetic experiences provide an opportunity for staff members to use the arts to connect with fellow human beings. As these experiences renew teachers' appreciation for human compassion, genius and potential they also remind teachers of the important work they do in the school--helping others reach their potential.

Another purpose could be to address what Roland Barth (2002) calls the "nondiscussables" of a school culture. He hypothesizes that every school has its unique culture, and every school has its own "nondiscussables:"

The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of nondiscussables: the fewer nondiscussables, the healthier the school; the more nondiscussables, the more pathology in the school culture. To change the culture of the school, the instructional leader must enable its residents to name, acknowledge, and address the nondiscussables – especially those that impede learning. (p. 8)

Aesthetic experiences provide an excellent way to bring "nondiscussables" to the table. In the graduate class we discuss what the experience has to do with leadership. In school settings, principals would ask questions that relate the experience to the school culture. Questions like the following may be appropriate: (1) What does this experience suggest about how we want to treat our students? (2) Does this experience cause us to think differently about our school mission? (3) How does this experience contribute to a fuller understanding of who we are as a community of educators? Of course, school needs and the activity, itself, will determine the specific questions to discuss, and skillful questioning could nudge a faculty toward addressing its "nondiscussables."

A third purpose might be to accomplish what Burns (1978) considers an essential leadership act.

Essentially the leader's task is consciousness-raising on a wide plane. . .The leader's fundamental act is to induce people to be aware or conscious of what they feel—to feel their true needs so strongly, to define their values so meaningfully, that they can be moved to purposeful actions. (pp. 44-45)

Aesthetic experiences raise consciousness and self-understanding by asking teachers to reflect on the ways they are moved and inspired by a work of art or a profound idea. As staff members become aware of their feelings, and those of their colleagues, they may be more likely to develop “relationships that mobilize” (Donaldson (2001).

A fourth purpose might be to address Jersild's (1955) observation about how adults work in schools:

“What goes on in the name of discussion, faculty meetings, committee meetings, and the like often does not bring people emotionally together but keeps them emotionally apart. Everything may be discussed solely on an intellectual and logical level (p. 71).”

As we emphasize raising student test scores in today's schools, this may be truer now than it was in the 1950s. Aesthetic experiences provide an opportunity for principals to balance the intellectual and rational approaches with experiences that connect people at an emotional level.

These are some of the general purposes that can be addressed through aesthetic experiences. Principals can work with their staffs to identify the specific purposes they want to accomplish in their schools.

### Steps to Implementing Aesthetic Experiences

Principals who want to begin a program of aesthetic experiences, can take the following steps. Although this sequence does not guarantee success, taking these steps has led to acceptance from a wide range of students in my graduate classes.

First, principals explain why they want staff members to engage in aesthetic experiences. In addition to giving an oral explanation, they should craft a written one. This challenges the principal to be clear about purposes, and it helps staff see potential benefits.

Second, principals present an activity, themselves. By doing this, the principal models the vulnerability and sincerity necessary for these activities to achieve their

purposes. A safe environment needs to be built before organizational members will share their feelings with others.

Third, principals ask for volunteers to lead experiences that are meaningful to them. Principals might ask a few key people to volunteer before the idea is presented to the whole staff. Deciding what work of art to present requires volunteers to think about what they are willing to share. They intuitively realize they are giving something of themselves to the group. This, in itself, contributes to school culture because leading an aesthetic experience is a deep sharing with colleagues.

Fourth, principals establish the structure for sharing aesthetic experiences. Will this activity be included in faculty meetings? Will the school conduct special aesthetic experience sessions? Will they be part of another structure? Principals can work with school leaders to either build a new structure, or include aesthetic experiences in an existing one.

Finally, principals arrange to have written reviews of the experiences and the discussions shared among staff. (This is like having meeting minutes recorded.) These reviews are important for capturing the discussions and relating the activity to the school. If principals write the reviews, themselves, they will have an opportunity to reinforce how the experience strengthens school culture. Principals who delegate this responsibility want to find someone who can write reviews that add to the impact of the experience and the discussion by re-stating the connections between what people shared and the culture they want to shape for their school. These reviews can also be occasions for thanking activity presenters and those who offered insightful observations and reflections.

### What About the Skeptics?

Each school is bound to have skeptics or those who will be uncomfortable with aesthetic experiences. As one of my students wrote,

I am a little skeptical of aesthetic experiences. I am not a very touchy-feely person, and have not taken time in a long time to go within myself. I am very aware of things that touch me or are special to me, but to analyze them the way we do goes beyond my personal parameters.

Principals will encounter similar sentiments among their staffs. Anticipating skepticism and discomfort is one of the reasons for putting purposes in writing. This sets the standard for discussing the benefits and objections to this activity. If the potential benefits are explained in writing, it is fair to ask skeptics to put their objections in writing. These written exchanges may deepen the discussion about purposes and may suggest modifications that will address the concerns of those who are skeptical or uncomfortable.

Jersild's (1955) findings suggest that, rather than being resistant to aesthetic experiences, many teachers are eager to engage in discussions about their professional struggles. He writes:

When one works individually with teachers and gives them a chance to share a little of that secret burden each of us usually bears alone, one can hear this same cry of pain and plea for help. This does not mean that pain is the only or the predominant condition in their lives. They know joy as well as pain. But it does mean that many who usually find it necessary to conceal their troubles and their hurts would like to find an opportunity to share them. (p. 11)

My experience with aesthetic activities confirms this finding from the 1950s. Students in my class (most of whom are K-12 teachers) look forward to aesthetic experiences, and I believe many principals will find that their staffs appreciate the opportunity to connect with colleagues in this way.

Principals should recognize that any culture-building activity is likely to make some organizational members uncomfortable. For example, ropes courses are an excellent activity for building trust and a sense of team. But this activity is more daunting for those who are not physically fit than for those who are fit.

Compared to other activities used to build shared meaning, trust, and community, aesthetic experiences offer several advantages. First, they are inclusive because the range of possible aesthetic activities is endless. All staff members can find something to share within their comfort level. Likewise, those who participate can accept the challenge to appreciate the experience at whatever level they feel comfortable. Second, these experiences cost nothing. Third, they are not time consuming. Therefore, they can be used as often as desired.

For principals who want to think more about aesthetic experiences and strengthening school culture, I suggest these books: *Awakening genius in the classroom* by Thomas Armstrong (1998). Some of the activities he suggests that K-12 teachers can use with their students could also be used as aesthetic experiences with teachers. *Care of the soul: A guide for cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life* by Thomas Moore (1992). *The active life: A spirituality of work, creativity, and caring* by Parker Palmer (1999). Both of these books discuss the importance of living in ways that balance rationality with emotions and spirituality.

## References

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## **Themes from art and literature:**

1. Lost innocence . . .
2. Unrequited love . . .
3. Illusion and reality . . .
4. Conformity and rebellion . . .
5. Imagination and inspiration . . .
6. Faith and doubt . . .
7. Man's inhumanity to man . . .
8. Clash of cultures . . .
9. Women's and men's roles . . .
10. Parents and children . . .
11. Death and dying . . .
12. Salvation and damnation . . .
13. Past, present and future . . .
14. Youth and age . . .