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Christy M. Moroye

University of Northern Colorado

P. Bruce Uhrmacher

University of Denver

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Standards, Not Standardization: Orchestrating Aesthetic Educational Experiences

CHRISTY MOROYE AND P. BRUCE UHRMACHER

Since the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, there has been a nation-wide focus on increasing student achievement by streamlining educational ends and focusing on standards. Many schools have utilized tools such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (see DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and the “What Works” series (see Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). The dialogue encouraged by PLCs and by sharing instructional strategies can move all teachers and students toward reaching standards. However, the dialogue leaves out important considerations: What kinds of educational experiences do we want students to have? How might we orchestrate such experiences?

We have encouraged teachers to ask that particular question by considering the role of arts integration and aesthetic experience. To date, the results are impressive. After reworking a couple of lesson plans, one high school English teacher exclaimed with satisfaction, “I just took something old and made it new again—these could reenergize someone.” A middle school science teacher remarked, “It’s about creating a different habit of mind when I plan lessons.”

These comments were made after a professional development workshop in which teachers learned how to rejuvenate their teaching and ultimately improve their students’ learning through an arts-based approach to education. This paper explores ways in which educators can personalize learning. Simply put, focus on making high quality student experiences the vehicle for reaching high standards. How to do just that has been the center of our on-going research and professional development series (Uhrmacher & Moroye, 2007; Uhrmacher, 2009; Moroye & Uhrmacher, 2009, 2010), the outcomes of which we elaborate upon here.

Experience and Heightened Experience

Many educators have utilized the ideas of the philosopher and educator John Dewey (1934), but fewer have focused on his work in aesthetics as a way to think about education. Although aesthetics might seem like an elusive concept,

Dewey reminds us that the term, derived from the Greek word *aesthetikos*, means capable of sensory perception, and he claims that hovering above any experience is the possibility of an “aesthetic experience.” For Dewey, in an aesthetic experience, a person fully engages one’s senses on an object of focus—perhaps a work of art in a museum, a mountain lake, or an urban sidewalk. Thus an aesthetic experience may have its roots in art, but it extends to all avenues of life, including learning. At such times when so engaged, we often lose ourselves in our task at-hand forgetting about time and daily concerns.

Aesthetic learning experiences have several implications. When fully analyzed we see that they provide the opportunities for students to reach significant educational intentions such as memory retention and an increase in knowledge, both important in a standards-based educational system. Additionally, aesthetic experiences enhance joy, creativity, and relevance (Uhrmacher, 2009). How then might we foster the opportunity for students to have such experiences in classrooms? Our answer is through CRISPA—research-based strategies devised to mesh the common curriculum with individualized learning in an engaging context. The acronym CRISPA stands for the six dimensions of an aesthetic experience: connections, risk-taking, imagination, sensory experience, perceptivity, and active engagement. When teachers activate some combination of these dimensions, they increase the likelihood that students will have heightened experiences that lead to important learning outcomes. Let’s examine each.

Connections refer to the ways in which individuals become engaged with ideas, books, or materials in the learning environment. These connections may be intellectual, emotional, sensorial, communicative (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1991), or social. Some students engage intellectually from the start; other students need to be drawn in viscerally. Still, some students relate to the subject matter communicatively: the individuals involved, or a time period, or through culture. Still others find connections in the social milieu of

the classroom. The goal is to both find ways to connect students to content and also to help them stay engaged throughout the learning experience.

In a language arts classroom, connections take many forms. The student who is eager to tell the teacher about his latest trilogy is already intellectually engaged with content—he loves to read. A teacher may foster an emotional or communicative connection by finding certain topics or time periods that interest students, such as vampires, horses, or the Victorian era. But finding topics of interest is only one way to help students make connections — some students need to feel socially engaged in group work by sharing ideas on a book or by working through a peer editing process. Teachers who find ways to connect students to the curriculum ensure that they stay engaged throughout the learning experience. Further, the more kinds of connections students can make to the curriculum, the more deeply they may contemplate the ideas and extend their learning. The goal is to create the conditions for a meaningful experience, and connecting to the content is a critical initial component.

Risk-taking refers to students' opportunities to try something new, to step out of their normal realm of experience. Researchers have pointed out that risk-taking may increase students' cognitive development, as well as their creativity, self-motivation, and student interest in subject matter, such as science (see Uhrmacher & Bunn, 2011).

Risks take many forms, and they are different for different students. While some students may find peer editing to be rewarding and engaging, others may feel apprehensive about the process. Reading aloud is another risk that we often ask students to take. In order for a risk to be productive and educative, it must move students toward and into the learning experience creating a heightened sense of awareness. This can be accomplished in a safe and student-focused atmosphere in which the teacher knows her students well.

Imagination refers to the manipulation of qualities or ideas. Imagination may be intuitive, in which a person has a sudden rush of insight; fanciful, in which a person combines unexpected elements such as a flying book; interactive, in which a person works with materials to yield a product; or mimetic, in which a person mirrors or mimics the creative work of another.

The creative writer is one who often uses her imagination, and the various forms described above could serve as writing prompts: Describe an “a-ha” moment; write a story about a conversation between your shoe and the sidewalk; write a poem in the shape of its subject. A mimetic example

may be as simple (and complex) as copying a favorite paragraph or poem onto a fresh piece of paper. The act of attending to letters, punctuation and form help us know something of cadence, diction, and what it means to be thinking like an author.

Sensory experience includes at least one person and a sensory interaction with an object. We use the term “object” metaphorically. It may refer to an actual object such as a sculpture or a beaker, but also it can refer to a text, a soundscape, a landscape, an image, or simply something upon which the person focuses her attention. A language arts classroom may be filled with sensory objects from a relevant text or objects that make interesting subjects of writing. Simply engaging in a multi-sensory experience provides rich data for conversation, for thinking, and for writing.

Perceptivity describes a deepened sensory experience. Perception is an achievement and as such can be developed. We might look at almost any object and notice its surface features, but when we really examine it, we begin to notice its subtle qualities. For example, students learning the bones of the body may enhance their knowledge by engaging in an elongated period of observation of the bone itself—the variations in color, the uneven surfaces, and the sounds when lightly scratched. The more one observes, the more one knows. Perceptivity in the language arts classroom allows students to practice awareness of text and the nuances of punctuation and structure.

Active engagement requires students to be in the driver's seat. They should be at the helm of their own learning. This could include making sure they are physically active or intellectually creating meaning or making choices about how to represent their knowledge. Whether engrossed in a text or writing an expository essay, students who are actively engaged do not struggle to find relevance because their experience is meaningful in and of itself.

The six aesthetic dimensions might be used in a variety of combinations throughout a lesson, a unit, or the academic year. Most teachers tend to use them in the initial planning of their lessons, which we have found to be quite useful. In fact teachers who have planned together using the themes have described their own planning experience to be heightened—their ideas flow and spiral upon each other to develop

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intricate and meaningful educational experiences (see Uhrmacher, Conrad, and Moroye, in press) Teachers also employ the dimensions “in the moment” when the opportunity opens.

CRISPA in Practice

Using CRISPA, teachers have designed lessons that span K-12 grades and content areas. The standards-based lessons provide for meaningful interaction with content. For example, one high school chemistry teacher divided his class into groups and had each act out one of the four ways that a particular chemical reaction works (omitting combustion). He noted that in addition to providing a sensory experience with risk-taking, “in order to develop a firm understanding of the different types of reactions, students are going to be encouraged to use their imaginations.” The science standard he met was, “Students know and understand common properties, forms, and changes in matter and energy.”

In another example, a math teacher decided to create deeper connections to calculus by having students explore mathematicians’ lives. She wanted each student to study one mathematician and to express what he or she learned by creating one of the following: “an iMovie, a set of visual sketches, a short story or a play.” This teacher’s full lesson plan indicated that she consciously employed the themes of connections, imagination, sensory experience and active engagement.

While we could elaborate on other lesson plans we have seen, let’s switch our focus and look at how CRISPA might work in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) or other group planning session. The vignette below displays a composite of ideas and practices we have heard teachers discuss. Since so many educators today are familiar with PLC’s, we use this setting to show how CRISPA may come to fruition in teacher dialogue.

Mrs. Gomez, a language arts teacher in a diverse high school, has led her 9th grade PLC to discuss what students should know and be able to do. They have been focused on reading-writing connections and using model texts to support student writing. In this meeting described below, we want to focus on the quality of the classroom experience, as well as meeting the standard that students should, “master the techniques of effective informational, literary, and persuasive writing.”

“The straightforward approach,” Mrs. Gomez says, “is to give students a set of essays to read and to ask them to compare and contrast the qualities of the essays. Then after reading the mentor texts, they could write one of their own.”

“But will they find that meaningful? We should think about the kinds of experiences students are having,” said Mr. Jones.

“I hear you,” adds Ms. Emerson. “While just comparing essays might meet the standard and uses Marzano’s compare-and-contrast strategy, I am not sure students will really remember what they learn.”

“And they might not be engaged,” Mr. Jones says. “We have state tests in three months, and we have to make sure our kids keep making progress. I have to get them excited about writing well.”

“Okay, so, we have to make sure they connect with the texts, so maybe we could choose a few that students enjoy—they could be different for each class or we could have some in common,” offers Mr. Li.

“Well, actually,” says Mrs. Jackson, “connections means trying to get kids connected to any subject. So, we don’t need different texts. We need to provide activities to get our students engaged. Some students will become interested if we get them emotionally charged. Others may need a cultural entrance.”

“Okay, I understand connections now, but risk-taking seems, well, a little risky. What are we supposed to do?” Ms. Emerson asks.

“Really, isn’t it about opportunities to try something new, something out of the norm that might be uncomfortable but meaningful?” Mrs. Gomez says. “I don’t think we’re supposed to repel off the building. So what if we ask for volunteers to stand in front of the class and tell a great story they have heard recently from a grandparent or a friend?”

“Yeah, and then the class could discuss what made the story effective, including details, the structure of events, and the voice of the storyteller. Then maybe the audience could draw a scene from one of the stories to use their imaginations,” Mr. Jones suggests. “But are we still addressing the standard?”

“Good question,” Mrs. Gomez says. “I think we are on target to ‘master the techniques of effective informational, literary, and persuasive writing.’”

“Now, what about sensory experience?” asks Ms. Emerson. Can anyone think of what kinds of sensory experiences would add to the learning experience?”

“Well what about focusing on details, which are critical to good narratives. Maybe if students bring in objects from their stories that present those details, that would be a good sensory experience,” says Mrs. Jackson.

“Oh yeah—and those objects could be arranged in the order they appear in the story so that students work through chronology of the narrative. Maybe if we wanted to use a little Marzano, we could even have them compare and contrast the objects—really see how the details tell the story,” Mr. Jones says.

“And we do need to use Marzano’s nine strategies as a part of our School Improvement Plan, so that makes sense to me,” Mrs. Gomez adds.

“So this perceptivity theme—is it just more sensory experience?” Mr. Jones asks.

“Yes, but with more focus. It is really about paying attention to all of the qualities of the objects, which directly leads to good story telling; so I say we should use it,” Mr. Li suggests. “Maybe the students pick the most significant detail and really deeply observe and then describe it.”

“Okay, well, I am not sure where that will lead, but I am willing to try it,” Mr. Jones says.

“Great, and after we all try this lesson, we’ll reconvene to talk about what students learned and how we can address students who did not,” Mrs. Gomez says.

“But we aren’t done—what about active engagement?” Ms. Emerson asks.

“Haven’t we covered that? Students are making choices, writing personal narratives, meeting the standards with their own creativity—I think active engagement is there already,” Mr. Jones says.

“True, and if you think about it, our standard’s evidence outcomes include that the narratives have to ‘use effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences’ so even though students have a lot of choice, they are still meeting that. I guess that’s what they mean by ‘standards, not standardization,’” Mr. Li says.

“Okay, one last question. How do we assess CRISPA?”

“We don’t!” Ms. Emerson says. “We assess their writing. CRISPA is how we engage them and make sure their experience is meaningful and memorable.”

Implementing CRISPA

The above scenario illustrates how CRISPA may be utilized in group planning as well as to show that CRISPA is compatible with a variety of current school reforms and

standards based education. CRISPA pushes teachers to think about the kinds of experiences students will have with the content. In our work, teachers have told us that when co-planning using CRISPA, the conversation spirals into a creative discussion that adds a “spark” to their practice and that allows teachers’ ideas to play off one another. One participant remarked that in her nine years of teaching, this was “the most exciting planning time she had ever had.”

A few considerations for implementation include the following: 1) Don’t worry about using all the themes all the time. Consider them elements to access when most appropriate in order to enhance the learning experience. 2) Focus on assessing the content standards, not the CRISPA elements. 3) Allow yourself to make mistakes. As with any new strategy, it takes time to activate the ideas in a meaningful way. Be open to others’ ideas, and enjoy taking a few risks yourself. We invite you to visit our website, which houses lesson plans, teachers’ ideas, and vignettes of CRISPA in action: www.pereceptualteaching.org.

Overall, teachers find CRISPA to be rejuvenating and energizing, in part because the elements activate teachers’ thinking and unleash their intelligence and creativity. Teachers appreciate not only the opportunity to think deeply, but also to have an engaging way to meet the external guidelines for curriculum and instruction, and to do so while keeping the individual needs of their students close in mind.

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Christy M. Moroye is an Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations and Curriculum Studies in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado. Her research interests include aesthetic and ecological perspectives of curriculum and teaching. She is the Associate Editor for *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*.

P. Bruce Uhrmacher is Professor of Education and Coordinator of the Curriculum and Instruction program at the Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver. He is also the faculty advisor to the Aesthetic Education Institute of Colorado. His research interests include aesthetic education, curriculum theory and practice, and arts-based approaches to research. He is the Co-Editor for *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue* journal, and Co-Editor of the book *Beyond the One Room School*.