

**Aesthetics in a Social Context and its
Relational Qualities to Service Learning**

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When discussing the nature and value of art, most scholarly writing sums these terms by grouping them as “aesthetics”(Anderson and McRorie, 2000). However, aesthetics has a multitude of definitions. It seems that in order to define aesthetics logically, one must have a definition of art, which a gleaning of literature shows is not an easy task or one that results in consistency. Thus, for the sake of this presentation paper, I will utilize Richard Anderson’s (1990) definition, “Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium”. This open definition’s premise specifies that several traits are usually present in those things commonly designated as art, even though no single trait is present in all art. With this background information, we can begin to attempt to answer the proposed question of “what is the nature and value (aesthetics) of art in a social context” by examining several aspects of aesthetics in western and non-western societies.

Human existence is predicated upon the ability to comprehend, communicate, and create meaning. Our endeavors at meaning derivation have propelled us to establish societal structures and symbol language relating to myths, religion, and art (Anderson, 1990). This is what differentiates us from other species. Our attempts to establish this meaning have led us to create symbolic relationships that help us to understand different constructs. It is this mode of thinking that we call human culture and in the words of the Netsilik Eskimos, “culture is as necessary as our breath”.

In some cultures, art is imbued with religious and supernatural significance and embodies the essence of human life and thought. Throughout the centuries, Christianity has placed an incredible amount of significance in its relics, crosses, and scriptural images. Art, in this instance, takes on an important service for society by carrying a meaning that transcends common and touches upon the supernatural. When religious concepts are so abstract that even

the most feverous barely grasp the meaning, art can serve as a medium whereby the masses can gain some understanding of the religious principles.

Often the meaning of art is seen as the abstract quality of beauty. Beauty can equate to the evoking of an emotional response as well as relating to generalized principles of harmony and energy, two social values that are present in the culture of Yoruba, an east-African tribe. Beauty standards are not always identical and depend on individual cultures. There are some standards of beauty based on human physiology such as healthy and beautiful skin while other serve a practical purpose such as the Shintoists who see beauty in cleanliness and purity, qualities that enhance healthiness.

Art may also be conceived as a manifestation of truth. Art is not indifferent to truth and essentially is the pursuit of truth. For the central-African Lega tribe, the structure of aesthetic values closely reflects the structure of their sociocultural values. Only the Lega who have attained the state of beauty, goodness, and wisdom are admitted to the highest levels of society. In Western culture in early blues music, the main aesthetic standard was truth that was based on universal human experience. The melodies had to be performed with convincing truth and expressed ideals that the listeners knew but were unable to communicate themselves.

Each culture has principles that account for the fundamental nature and value of art. I have only described a few. Others such as symbol, feeling, and style also can be included within these categories. These principles give the culture meaning and purpose. Art is universal and the fact that it cannot be labeled or termed in a precise definition does not make it a trivial component for cultures. On the contrary, art plays and has played a key role in cultures and civilizations where it conveys meanings.

What are related service-learning qualities?

The term service learning, though not new in practice but relatively new in terminology, purposefully connects academics to the act of service. Studies and literature indicate that the definition of service learning varies according to institution, program, and practitioner. Service learning is both a program type and a philosophy of education. As a program type, service learning includes myriad ways that students can perform meaningful service – to their communities and to society while engaging in some form of reflection or study that is related to the service. As a philosophy of education, service learning reflects the belief that education must be linked to social responsibility and that most effective learning is active and connected to experience in some meaningful way.

Within the context of education, both service learning and arts education contribute to youth development and community development in unique ways. Service learning fosters conscience, providing opportunities for active civic membership by giving young people ways to make contributions to their community (Anderson, 1998). Arts education fosters creativity and helps to build a vibrant community in which participants are active producers as well as consumer of the arts. Both share an approach to education that promotes authentic, active, community-connected learning. Both provide opportunities to focus on competencies, such as teamwork and problem solving skills and both share core values:

- Students learn through relationships with peers, teachers, and a community of adults who use knowledge in realms beyond schools.
- Students learn when they are engaged, and engagement is most likely when students see a personal and social value to what they are learning.
- Students learn through active, in-depth investigation and exploration.

- Most importantly, students learn through opportunities to address and reflect on authentic problems.

As seen from the above text, the nature and value of art in a social context revolves around the meaning it conveys within that culture whether it relates to religion, beauty, truth, etc. These aesthetic values or principles give culture its meaning and purpose. Service learning also provides students similar principles. The service as well as the academic instruction must provide some meaning for the student in order for the student to retain, advocate, or even disagree with the meaning. Regardless, learning was involved; learning that conveyed meaning. Plato wrote that the most important task of educators is to teach young people to “find pleasures in the right things”. The integration of service learning and the arts may provide just that pleasure—the pleasure of doing something for a clear purpose, of engaging in activities that require skill, concentration, and involvement, and of contributing to the quality of life of a community.

References

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