

Lincoln Center Education



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**Aesthetic Education, Inquiry,
and the Imagination**



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Aesthetic Education and Inquiry

For over thirty years, Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) has emphasized an alternative approach to traditional forms of arts education and arts integration called “aesthetic education.” Incorporating some elements from both these approaches, aesthetic education includes interactions with high quality works of art supported by an inquiry process particularly developed for those interactions, along with art-making explorations. Fundamentally, what the Institute has done is turn traditional skills-based arts instruction inside-out by starting directly with the perception of artworks. John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* is the touchstone for the Institute’s approach here:

...to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation, the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest.

(Dewey 1980, 54)

It is in service to this approach to perception—to recreating choices analogous to those the artist made—that the Institute’s practice includes explorations in art-making skills, rather than teaching skills in the service of creating an art product (as in traditional arts education). Based on Dewey’s definition of what it means to perceive, teachers and students who work with LCI approximate the artist’s choices in a particular artwork by exploring the artistic/aesthetic process and the use of contextual resource materials. Then (unlike what can happen in some forms of arts integration), when the artworks under study are linked to other curricular areas, the integrity of the art, as art, is preserved, while connections across other disciplines are made deeply and authentically.

Lecturing at LCI’s Summer Session in 1980, Maxine Greene, the Institute’s philosopher-in-residence, defined “aesthetic education” as

...an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what there is to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this

happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened.

Furthermore, she sees this kind of education as “integral to the development of persons—to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional and imaginative development.”

(Greene 2001, 6)

More specifically, as presently practiced by Lincoln Center Institute, aesthetic education consists of a continuous experience with a work of art over time, mediated by a particular form of individual and group inquiry. This inquiry occurs within and around art-making and uses multimedia and multidisciplinary resources to explore the social and cultural context of the artwork and any further questions that are sparked in the process. We see this model of inquiry having application to, and a resonance with, disciplines other than the arts.

Nonetheless, inquiry, here, has a very particular kind of meaning that differentiates it from that typically undertaken in the social or pure sciences. It is also different than philosophical inquiry, which can focus on the nature of inquiry itself. Based on the work of artists, our version of aesthetic inquiry follows closely the process artists use as they create works of art. As such, it includes, along with cognition (including problem-solving skills and imagination), use of the senses, emotion, and other forms of embodiment.

This particular type of inquiry is facilitated by teaching artists, arts educators, and classroom teachers, as they guide participants’ explorations with the process of artistic creation. All artists, no matter what their discipline, are inspired in some way to explore their medium, and in the process of creating something new ask questions, notice deeply, imagine alternative solutions to issues as they arise, try out these solutions, and reflect on what they have done. They go through this inquiry process any number of times until they are satisfied with the results. In order to do this, they must develop capacities related to imagination and creativity. It is this inquiry process, initially guided and made transparent by Institute teaching artists, that helps participants in aesthetic education develop these very same capacities.

The Capacities for Imaginative Learning¹

For a number of years, Lincoln Center Institute had been thinking about how its work would change if it were involved in creating a school from the ground up. The opportunity presented itself with a request for proposals from New Visions for Public Schools and the New York City Department of Education to establish new small high schools in partnership with outside organizations.

The name of the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry (HSAII), founded in 2005, reflects the essence of the Institute’s work. For the proposal, we were asked to

¹In their original form, and as they were used during their first two years of existence, the Capacities for Imaginative Learning were called the Capacities for Aesthetic Learning. See *Teaching and Learning at Lincoln Center Institute* for this original form.

articulate, in a language that new 9th-grade students could understand, what they might learn at this school that would be different from any other high school. Drawing on the history of philosophy and practice in aesthetic education that developed the inquiry process described above, what were called the “Capacities for Aesthetic Learning” were born. Over time, as the Capacities’ connections to the imagination became obvious, we changed their name, but not their content. Now called the Capacities for Imaginative Learning, they, as presented to the students at the high school, are:

Noticing Deeply: To identify and articulate layers of detail in a work of art through continuous interaction with it over time.

Embodying: To experience a work of art through your senses, as well as emotionally, and also to physically represent that experience.

Questioning: To ask questions throughout your explorations that further your own learning; to ask the question, “What if?”

Making Connections: To connect what you notice and the patterns you see to your prior knowledge and experiences, as well as to others’ knowledge and experiences including text and multimedia resources.

Identifying Patterns: To find relationships among the details you notice, group them, and recognize patterns.

Exhibiting Empathy: To respect the diverse perspectives of others in our community; to understand the experiences of others emotionally as well as in thought.

Creating Meaning: To create your own interpretations based on the previous capacities, see these in the light of others in the community, create a synthesis, and express it in your own voice.

Taking Action: To act on the synthesis of what you have learned in your explorations through a specific project. This includes projects in the arts, as well as in other realms. For example: you might write and produce your own play; you might create a dance; you might plant a community garden as a combined service-learning/science project; you might organize a clothing drive for homeless neighbors as a combined service-learning/humanities project.

Reflecting/Assessing: To look back on your learning, continually assess what you have learned, assess/identify what challenges remain, and assess/identify what further learning needs to happen. This occurs not only at the end of a learning experience, but is part of what happens throughout that experience. It is also not the end of your learning; it is part of beginning to learn something else.

As the Capacities have been implemented at HSII and in a number of Institute Focus Schools (schools where aesthetic education is woven throughout the curriculum), the Institute began exploring their connections to integrating the study of artworks across the curriculum, as well as to the cultivating imagination. We have learned that while specific content-area connections may not always be appropriate, process connections through the Capacities seem to be relevant no matter what the curricular area. We also have discovered that connections between the Capacities and cultivating the imagination are, at their core, complex, and that they occur on many levels in expectedly non-linear ways.

Creating Authentic Connections with the Capacities

Most often, when the arts are integrated across the curriculum, connections are made between discipline content and the subject of the artwork. For instance, a social studies teacher who is teaching the theme of immigration might choose to have her students study a theater piece, such as *Secret History: Journeys Abroad, Journeys Within* by Ping Chong, which focuses on the stories of refugees. A math teacher who is interested in teaching rotation, reflection, and transformation on the coordinate plane, might see connections to the moves dancers make in a flamenco performance. While some teachers are adept at making these connections, others are not. And while some disciplines and themes for study lend themselves to content connections, others do not. What we are beginning to learn at HSII, and from discussions with teachers at some of our Focus Schools, is that the Capacities for Imaginative Learning can be seen as integral to content learning across all curricular subjects, from English/language arts to science and mathematics. Said differently, the capacities that can be developed from studying works of art through the Institute's practice of aesthetic education may be integral to all learning, not just learning in the arts.

Evidence of possible connections teachers can make comes from all content areas. For example, when science teachers look at the Capacities, they see skills they want to develop, such as noticing natural and physical phenomena deeply, asking questions about what is seen, making connections to other phenomena, seeing patterns within and among phenomena, and forming hypotheses or new questions. When social studies teachers ask their students to read from primary sources, they want them to notice deeply, ask questions, make connections, see patterns among thoughts, and form their own meaning. Similarly, when teaching literacy (either in English classes, or across the curriculum), they ask students to look carefully (or notice deeply), ask questions, make connections to themselves, to other texts or to the world, and to infer (or create) meaning. And the teacher facing math-phobic students might enter into the study of a new concept by asking students what they noticed about the numbers, what questions they might have about them, and how they resembled other number concepts they have seen in the past. While not all the Capacities might come into play in a particular class or unit, there seem to be enough connections to concepts necessary for success that teachers can use the language of the Capacities no matter what subject area is being taught.

It needs to be stated that there are differences among subject matters. And, of course, there are differences among the arts. But all subject areas bring something unique to education. Sometimes it is argued that what distinguishes the arts is that they rely on a spark of inspiration—a leap of imagination that is not only valued, but essential to the quality of the work. Practitioners in other subject areas might argue the same thing—an astronomer who is inspired by the sight of a super nova to question its composition, for instance. Nonetheless, as John Dewey reminds us, the arts rely, for their very being, on sensations and emotions united with meaning, and embody possibility. As such, they are different, and become, for Dewey, as well as for Lincoln Center Institute, the best evidence of the “true nature of imagination.” (Dewey 1980, 268)

The Capacities and Cultivating Imagination

It is the complexity that surrounds the Capacities’ relationship to cultivating imagination, their non-linearity, and their possible relationship to different developmental learning patterns that has inspired us to explore them further. Pragmatically presented as the list on page 4 for the purposes of a proposal to create a school, the form of the Capacities lent itself to assumptions about linearity and hierarchy that did not echo what we knew, based on experience, about how students learn through aesthetic education. Those familiar with our work were quick to point out this disparity. Our reaction was to say that, of course, the Capacities were not linear, but we still did not know exactly how to depict them. In addition, from years of experience, we knew that students with different learning styles, especially kinesthetic learners, benefited from the Institute’s emphasis on using different kinds of entry points (aural, visual, and kinesthetic) to explorations of works of art. This resonated with the experiences of the teachers at the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry, as they observed their students work with the Capacities over some time. However, it is only after thinking more about the imagination that a newer pattern began to emerge.

What we have discovered is that there does seem to be a kind of scaffolding and recursiveness that occurs with the Capacities. In the entry level, we find that the first three capacities, **embodying**, **noticing deeply**, and **asking questions** are precursors for the other six capacities, but not in any particular order. Some students must be asked, or ask their own, questions before they can notice. Others must start with some kind of embodying—drawing or gesture, for instance, in order to notice and articulate levels of detail. Others may just look or hear directly. And some combination of these three capacities in revolving and recursive ways seems to enhance all of them over time, as well as promote learning that uses the other six. Kinesthetic, aural, and visual learners can all enter the process with their strengths. And, no matter the point of entry, it also seems clear to us that all of these capacities, in varying ways, are involved in forming a mental image, a basic construct of imagination defined by Mary Warnock:

Imagination is our means of interpreting the world, and it is *also* our means of forming images in the mind. The images themselves are not separate from our interpretations of the world; they are our way of thinking of the objects of

the world. We see the forms in our mind's eye and we see these very forms in the world. We could not do one of these things if we could not do the other. (Warnock 1978, 194)

In addition, Maxine Greene reminds us of the “passion for seeing things up close and large.” For her, the passion for noticing deeply is the “doorway for imagination.” It is the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise. (Greene 1995, 16) How this passion for noticing deeply is developed remains open for exploration. For Greene, it seems to come from the noticing itself. But perhaps the passion to look deeply must be cultivated in multiple ways in order for it to have importance over time. Again, the recursive interaction of imagination's facets comes into play.

The second group of capacities includes **making connections**, **seeing patterns**, and **exhibiting empathy**. We would argue that none of these could occur without the forming of an initial mental image through the use of imagination, and that noticing deeply, embodying, and asking questions seem to influence what happens in this second group as well. Yet the second group asks for something more, something relational among the mental images. According to McCleary (1993) these relations start with an embodied imagination, where imagination is rooted in the very young child's ability to distinguish between the experience of his or her body and another person's body. It seems that for McCleary, embodying is primal to imagining, and to creating analogies. Might not this kind of imaginative thinking be akin to making connections, and more complexly, to exhibiting empathy?

Indeed Greene reminds us of the importance of the imagination if empathy is to exist. She speaks of imagination as the cognitive capacity that permits us to give credence to alternative realities, to grasp another's world. Furthermore, for her, a specific kind of imagination growing out of empathy—the social imagination—is the “capacity of inventing visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society...” (Greene 1995, 5) This implies another kind of looping and spiraling between imagination, empathy, and imagination again, in perhaps a slightly different guise as social imagination.²

Seeing patterns is somewhat different, even though patterns are rooted in similarity and difference, which are rooted in the ability to make connections. In order to see a pattern, mental images must be compared to each other and either included in the pattern, or not. We have discovered that tolerance for ambiguity (images may seem to fit or not, depending on where one is in the process of seeing the pattern) and the ability to constructively resolve dissonance (deciding whether something actually fits or not) seem to enter here, as well, and will be added to the second group of capacities as our work evolves.

The third group of capacities includes **creating meaning** and **taking action**, both of which build on the previous six capacities, again in non-linear ways. It makes sense that students might embody, notice deeply, and ask questions over and over

² It is important to note that empathy is not a foregone conclusion from the creation of analogies or connections. As Greene reminds us, when empathy does not occur, the imagination can be used, unfortunately, in a destructive, rather than constructive, manner.

again as they see patterns, make connections, and perhaps exhibit empathy, as they create meaning and take action. The kind of action students can take is varied: it can be personal, social, political, or the creation of a new object or idea.

Within this group of capacities, also, there is scaffolding and recursiveness. In order to take action, a kind of meaning must be created. And in order to create meaning, a kind of imaginative act must occur. For John Dewey, “When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure imagination.” Furthermore “...an imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion and meaning come together in a union that makes a new birth in the world.” (Dewey 1980, 267)

The last of the Capacities for Imaginative Learning in the original list is **reflecting/assessing**. And perhaps this is the most recursive of all, having applicability throughout the imaginative process. Reflection and assessment occur constantly in the first group of capacities as one notices deeply, asks questions, embodies, and goes through the process again. The same is true for making connections, seeing patterns, and exhibiting empathy—one is always looking back, asking and revising. And in order to create meaning and take appropriate action, one has to reflect, assess, and do so again, to make sure “appropriate” is what the action will be.

At this level, the reflecting and assessing are informal, a part of the ongoing process of imagination and learning. Nonetheless, it is possible to more formally take snapshots of learning at particular defined points along the way, to look at what is happening to students. These snapshots must be seen as just that—frozen moments in time taken from something individual that is alive and active. They are key sections of what is happening—important bits of information that help us help students develop as fully educated people—but not the whole moving picture.

How do we assess the whole moving picture? How will we know if the *Capacities for Imaginative Learning*, and the kinds of teaching they engender, help cultivate imagination in students over time? What are the implications of this for the place of aesthetic education in fostering learning across the curriculum? The answers to these questions can help us articulate a broadly defined curricular pathway for a new model of embedding the arts, not only through the content connections in the various disciplines, but also through teaching and learning that foster the imagination, whatever the subject matter being covered.

As always, we invite you to join the conversation...

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