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## **Encouraging Empathy through Aesthetic Engagement: An Art Lesson in Living Compositions**

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### **Abstract**

This paper demonstrates how aesthetic engagement can encourage empathy and caring in the art classroom. As artful inquiry, this hybrid form of arts-based educational research and teacher research examines my own classroom practice and pedagogy exploring how aesthetics can become a philosophy of care. Part 1 outlines the *Living Compositions Exercise*, an introductory activity students play to introduce the concepts of space, relationship, and care, and a discussion on how this is an aesthetic experience that encourages empathy. Part 2, *Inquiry into Piazza*, addresses how student inquiry, artistic critique, and dialogue can lead to self-formation through art. The outcome of aesthetic engagement here is to promote empathetic response and action, which is manifested through the living inquiry of the students.

## Introduction

In Alberto Giacometti: A Retrospective Exhibition, the artist said of his work: In the street people astound and interest me more than any sculpture or painting. Every second the people stream together and go apart, then they approach each other to get closer to one another. They unceasingly form and re-form living compositions [italics added] in unbelievable complexity. . . . It's the totality of this life that I want to reproduce in everything I do (Childs, 2008, p. 3).

This observation by Giacometti inspired me to reframe how I taught figurative sculpture to my fourth grade students. I imagined Giacometti as a gangly man sitting on a park bench, sketchbook in hand, watching passersby go about their day. With or without purpose they pass him, in an un-orchestrated series of movements, causing him to scribble their silhouettes down in skinny forms. The bodies seem to glide in and out of each other. He feels their emptiness, their isolation, their unrequited meeting. Hoping to bring to life a part of his experience, to capture that unknown outcome, he casts his sketches in bronze, and arranges them in a composition called *Piazza*.

As I imagined this moment of conception in Giacometti's artistic eye, I wondered, what makes a *living composition*? There are two very different ideas at play in this term. The first being quite literal—Giacometti based his sculpture on human figures, which form and re-form visually to make living compositions— that is the subject of his piece. However, living compositions can also imply how we live our lives as works of art, the Foucauldian notion of care of the self (Foucault, 1985/1986; 1984/1997). What would it mean for my students to learn to live their lives as compositions, as works of art? If we are all compositions, should we learn to be harmonious and balanced? Should we learn to care, respect, and appreciate each other's place in the composition? Should we communicate with kindness and empathy, knowing everyone's part is essential for the existence of the composition? If so, where might this type of learning begin? It is these questions and to these ends that I believe Giacometti meant by capturing the "totality of life" (Childs, 2008, p. 3).

The capacity to relate to one another and treat each other as living compositions begins with students' ability to empathize and care for each other. Costantino (2008) contends that one of the curricular aims for aesthetic experience is "an ontological imperative toward greater self-understanding which may generate increased empathic understanding of others" (p. 2). This paper demonstrates how aesthetic engagement can enhance a traditional art lesson in figurative sculpture to encourage empathy and caring in the classroom. As artful inquiry, this hybrid form of arts-based educational research (Cahmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008) and action/teacher research (Carson & Sumara, 1997; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Sumara,

1998) examines my own classroom practice and pedagogy exploring how aesthetics can become a philosophy of care.

I present the paper in two parts, each part beginning with one aspect of the art lesson and a discussion of the pedagogical choices and philosophic implications within that section. Part 1 outlines the *Living Compositions Exercise*, an introductory activity the students play to explore the concepts of space and relationship, and a discussion on how this aesthetic engagement may encourage empathy. Part 2, *Inquiry into Piazza*, addresses how student inquiry and critique may lead to self-formation through art. I conclude with a discussion on how a relational based assessment helps demonstrate students' capacity to internalize concepts like isolation, connection, and empathy. The goal of the aesthetic inquiry here is to promote empathetic response and action, through reflection and imagination. I agree with Maxine Greene that "imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible" (1995/2000, p.3). Rather than present criteria or standards for creating a caring, empathetic classroom, this paper explores how art curriculum in the elementary classroom can serve as an opening (Irwin & Springgay, 2008) to the nature of aesthetics as a philosophy of care.

### **Artful Inquiry: Arts-Based Research**

The art lesson and research methodology presented below are based on exploring living inquiry, as it is defined in *a/r/tographic practices* (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Springgay et al., 2005). *A/r/tography* is a form of practitioner-based research, where inquiry into theory is an evolution of questions within the practitioner, one that is relational and rhizomatic (Irwin, et al., 2006). Proponents of *a/r/tography* recognize how "the simultaneous use of language, image, materials, situations, space and time" allow research and theory to become "an embodied, living space of inquiry" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 106). The process of learning to form one's life as a work of art, to become a living composition, can best be explored in a methodology that emphasizes the conditions of relationality that open up a space for "artful, educational, and creative inquiry" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 115). The research conditions of *a/r/tography* are based on concepts, rather than methods, what *a/r/tographers* refer to as renderings, or "intersubjective locations through close analysis renders new understandings and meanings" which are "embedded in the process of artful inquiry" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 115).

In other words, the space in which I teach this lesson and perform this research is constantly changing and forming itself. The concept I analyze is care and empathy, which is never static and stable, but always relational and dynamic. The data is not contained in the single act of teaching or reflecting on that teaching. Rather, data here can be seen as the process of teaching, relating, and creating artwork that explores the concept of empathy. While this

research is more a hybrid form of teacher research informed by a/r/tography, I found that it was through this research that I began to view my role as artist as one who makes art for/with my students. Our art making, even if it is my exemplar and their creation, is a way to begin a dialogue about an issue—a dialogue through art. I will describe this a little more within the *Inquiry into Piazza* section. Yet this paper attempts to open up conversations about the place and definition of aesthetics in the art classroom. One rendering of a/r/tography is creating openings, which serve as spaces to “give attention to what is seen and known and what is not seen and known” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 118). Through an opening, meaning is questioned, challenged often resisted, rather than presented as finite and clear.

I wrote this paper inspired by Barone’s (2001) narrative storytelling and Hankins’ (2003) reflective journaling. Conversation pieces throughout this paper are remembered, a type of memory data (St.Pierre, 1997), based on my experiences teaching this lesson. Writing this lesson as conversations with my students enabled me to create a sort of virtual reality, or alternative reality. According to Tom Barone and Eliot Eisner, creating an “alternative reality” through the arts, and conversely through arts-based research, challenges us to create a new set of meanings and values which we previously have ignored (1997, pp. 73-4). Teacher journals, reflections, and scholarly work based on experience are all data gathered in teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). While collecting data, I strive to remember that through teacher research, “practice and practical action are reconsidered as an embodiment and expression of theory, teachers are, by extension, recognized as theory builders” (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p.10). I continue to look into how my curriculum and pedagogy not only reflect theory, but embody it. My students’ artwork also represents this embodied data, and serves as an opening for the research. Their art making serves as a site for questioning, both for myself and the students. Their finished work serves as the beginning of reflective and reflexive art practices.

I designed the lesson to create an aesthetic space where the concepts of caring, isolation, and relation could be questioned, challenged, and deconstructed. Engaging in action/teacher research as a postmodern practice “means trying to create forms that portray the richness of the complex set of relations without reducing them to the flatness of cause-effect generalizations” (Sumara, 1998, p.44). I hoped that through the non-linear teaching of this lesson, we would have a chance to explore caring in a multidimensional way, rather than one that is based on simply defining terms. The art lesson was first taught to two classes of fourth grade students in a suburban private elementary school, and then to a pre-service collegiate class where I was a guest teacher. These three class times serve as the basis for much of the conversational pieces. I have since taught the lesson five more times, to my current group of fourth grade (two classes) and seventh grade (two classes) students at the same suburban

private school, and at our state-wide art educator conference to art teachers from a variety of backgrounds.

As teacher researcher influenced by a/r/tography, I use not only my classroom observations, student artwork, student conversations, and reflective journaling as evidence and data, but also recognize that my findings and data are constantly being formed and reformed through my own lived experience and the relationships with/between my students, my colleagues, and my mentors. Relationships can also be data. Using an arts-based methodology helps position this paper as an understanding of experiences, rather than presenting criteria for teaching with an ethic of care. As the artist/researcher/teacher of/with my students, this paper is a journey through the lesson and how my students constructed a new space through their inquiry that helped me understand how aesthetics can be a practice in caring.

### **Part 1**

#### ***Living Compositions Exercise***

This art lesson begins with a type of role-playing/reflective game before students have seen Giacometti's work.<sup>1</sup> My fourth graders enter the art room to find six stools waiting in the middle of the room, all other stools forming a 'U' shape around the stools. Six volunteers sit in the stools, all of them facing each other. I announce to the curious students that our next lesson is about space. We begin with simple questions like, what is space? What are the different ways artists can show space? By the fourth grade, students would be able to demonstrate a knowledge of space in regards to showing depth, overlapping, and creating two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. Then I direct the questioning toward people in space, namely, these six people occupying this particular space. For each formation of bodies (first they face inward, towards the center, then they face the same direction, lastly they face outward, with their backs towards each other) I ask the same three questions: Where could these people be? Are they interacting with each other or ignoring each other, and how can you tell? What is the overall mood of the space?

This activity sets the tone for the entire lesson, demonstrating that the emphasis is on the relationship of the people within the space. Although I ask the questions, the responses are based on students' own experiences within these imagined settings. It is a type of "peer mediated inquiry" through which students can share their lived differences (Schertz, 2002, p. 29). Generally, when the six students face each other, everyone associates being at a table, either with friends or family sharing a meal, playing a game, or working on a project at school. When the class answers the question about the mood of the space, I make sure they give me visual cues, such as facial expressions, interactions between the people, and body positions. When they propose words like happy, friendly, and fun for the mood of the first

formation, they must defend their feeling with qualities they notice from the students like, “they are smiling at each other”, “they are swaying their legs and bumping their feet,” or “they are giggling.” These qualities might even be more subtle, like a change in demeanor, tone of voice, or a shift from moving to being still.

### ***Reasoning Relationships***

The first and last questions, where could these people be and what is the overall mood, are aimed at developing students’ qualitative reasoning skills, what Siegesmund (2005) calls exploring perceptual detail and attending to their emotional reactions. The question in between, whether or not the people are interacting or ignoring each other, begins to point to the greater purpose of the lesson, or interpreting the meaning (Siegesmund, 2005). The rest of the lesson will explore this concept in many ways, this is just the introduction to relationships between people and how the way we occupy space affects those relationships. But by asking this question at the beginning, I am asking students to begin to interpret not only the *qualities* of the people in the space, but the way in which those qualities *mean something to them*, tapping into their own memories and experiences.

While qualitative reasoning is usually associated with interpreting works of art (Siegesmund, 2005), it is also useful here in interpreting a situation before viewing a work of art. In a way, I am setting up a kind of simulated aesthetic experience. According to Dewey (1934/1989), we are having an aesthetic experience when we attend to feeling and emotion, in relationship with experience, and reflecting on that experience. This leads to understanding. Heid (2005) says that aesthetic experiences elevate our cognition and bring ordinary moments into transformative moments. In the art classroom, aesthetic experiences should help us recognize a “deeper presence within ourselves and within our world” (Heid, 2005, p.49). In this activity, students are presented with ordinary physical encounters but are asked to look at them from a new perspective. This is not just questioning to see how the bodies *appear* in space, if they are visually appealing or not, but to look at them *in relationship* to each other. Therein lies the beginning of the transformative process. This is the aesthetic—the seeing in relationship.

According to Richard Shusterman the “concept of aesthetics as being a distinct mode of perception and dimension of experience is currently experiencing a strong revival in aesthetic theory” (2006, p. 240). To define aesthetics as sensory perception with the goal of *understanding another* through an *understanding of self* is exactly the term that I will relate to the practice of caring. Gablik (1995) calls this connective aesthetics, and claims it as a postmodern term signifying a new paradigm in aesthetics, one that centers on cultivating a compassionate, relational self, rather than one that is autonomous and value-free. Aesthetics as a philosophy of relationship, based on empathy and imagining the other, with the ultimate

goal of developing a moral society, is not a new paradigm, but one steeped in the history of aesthetics from the eighteenth century.

The term aesthetics, widely acknowledged in the field of art as being a philosophy of beauty or the premise on which to define an object as work of art, the philosophy of art itself, originated in the eighteenth century as a term for the science of perception. It was the word used in 1735 by Alexander Baumgarten to define his project of sensory perception, dealing with the ways we come to know of something beyond logic as expressed in symbols by words or numbers (Shusterman, 2006; Siegesmund, 1999). The term aesthetics has also been translated into various phrases including sensual perception (Hammermeister, 2002), sensible cognition (Nuzzo, 2006), and the ability to perceive (Siegesmund, 1999), but all seem to relate to the relationship between thinking and feeling. Roughly, aesthetics was the word he used to define how we gain important insights through our senses. Shedding light on the intricacy of this meaning, Richard Siegesmund noted:

The word aesthetics comes from the Greek word *aisthenesthai*, which translates as the ability to perceive. In Greek, verbs are conjugated in three ways: 1) the action an individual initiates, 2) as action done to an individual, or 3) an action that is something in between these two poles. *Aisthenesthia* is conjugated in the third fashion. Baumgarten and his contemporaries interpreted this verb and conjugation as reflecting a dynamic state between subject and object (1999, p. 43).

Here, it seems that aesthetics is not just about how *I* perceive, but the relationship between myself and an object or person. The experience is reciprocal. I may create a work of art, and upon using the media, the work speaks to me, or I learn something new from the engagement, aesthetics tries to explain this back and forth of learning and experiencing.

### ***Perception and Reception***

If we are to understand aesthetics as the ability to perceive, we must first define what we mean by perceiving. Perception is not just seeing, it is being carefully attuned to the qualities of an object or person so as to see something new, something relational. To perceive, I must feel as I think (Siegesmund, 1999). My feeling and my thinking must be joined in relationship, which Dewey (1934/1989) calls having an aesthetic experience:

[Aesthetic experience] has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing an alteration, but consists of them in relationship. To put one's hand in the fire that consumes it is not necessarily to have an experience. The action

and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the object of all intelligence (p. 51).

When aesthetics is approached from the perspective of learning to perceive, it becomes a philosophy of relation, a way to teach students how to perceive and receive each other and the world in meaningful ways. Yet for this perception to be caring it requires an element of reception and a focus on developing caring relations.

Nel Noddings even noted that “the receptivity characteristic of aesthetic engagement is very like the receptivity of caring” (1984/2003, p.22). When we say we are receptive of a new idea, it means we have an open mind, free of values or preconceptions, ready to approach the idea with fresh insight. Being receptive of an aesthetic experience means we are present in the moment, our senses concentrated and engaged, allowing ourselves to be changed by the experience. Students could view *The Piazza* by Giacometti discussing in detail the visual qualities, examining the use of line and texture in portraying the human form. They might describe their feelings as they view the piece, noting the mood of isolation or loneliness. They would be perceiving. In order to convert this perception into a caring relation, they need to receive it. They need to internalize the concept of isolation or loneliness, relate it to their lives, and let it change the way they think or feel; in other words, to care. In the opening activity with the students in chairs, which is followed through with inquiry into *Piazza*, students are asked to not only perceive the six students in the space, but to tap into their felt response and their own memories in order to *relate* to the six students in the space. It is the beginning of reception.

For example, more complex relationships occurred when the six students all faced the same direction. Many observing students (as well as two of the six) were unsure if the six were interacting with each other or ignoring each other. I let the students give reasons for their conclusions. Many noted that if the six were on a bus, they were probably strangers. Yet another student piped up to say, “Yeah, but what if it’s a school bus? Then you know ‘um...or you live near ‘um.” Another suggestion was that the six could be at a baseball game. Again, opposite opinions arose. If it was a tee-ball game, you might be close friends with everyone on the bleachers, but at a professional game, more than likely they would be strangers. One bright girl made the point here about the professional game, “But you all have something in common if you are there, like, you might be cheering for the same team. I was at a game once and started talking with these girls in front of me. We had fun. They liked the Braves and we all cheered for Chipper.” She smiles at recalling the game. Other students chime in with their stories, too. This prompted me to ask another question for the class to consider, “So, you can feel connected to people you don’t know, people who are strangers?” “Yeah,” the girl replied,



“but, like I wouldn’t talk to just anyone at the stadium.” “Why not?” I ask. “Well, these girls were, like, my age and stuff. They were wearing jerseys, and well- they just seemed nice.”

### ***Recognizing Relationships and Modeling Empathy***

There are two very important ideas contained in this brief discussion, ideas that help guide the rest of the lesson. The first is criteria for relationships. Already fourth grade students recognize the need to have something in common to form a relationship. This implies that they might ignore someone if they don’t see an avenue for connection. While we want students to develop close relationships with friends, empathetic relations may involve caring for those we don’t see as friends, or those we don’t see at all. If we can’t see how our lives are related, empathy cannot develop. This becomes a curricular goal of the lesson: to recognize relationships that we wouldn’t have noticed previously.

I mentioned earlier that this activity is an aesthetic engagement based on perception and reflection (Dewey, 1934/1989; Siegesmund, 1999). But I will take it one step further in that aesthetics involves reception. Being receptive of an aesthetic experience means we are present in the moment, our senses concentrated and engaged, allowing ourselves to be changed by the experience. Dewey (1934/1989) noted this reception as essential to being engaged in the aesthetic: “The esthetic or undergoing phase of experience is receptive. It involves surrender. But the adequate yielding of the self is possible only through a controlled activity that may well be intense” (p. 59). This controlled activity can be the creation of or interaction with art. Students are more likely to be receptive of new ideas when they feel it is safe to explore, question, and express those ideas. The art classroom, when centered in an ethic of care, can become that place where students feel safe. The arts themselves promote exploration and expression of new ideas (Eisner, 2002).

The second idea is that the development of empathy and caring has begun through the interaction between teacher and student, as well as between the students’ themselves. Gregory (2000) notes “care and democracy are less subjects to be learned than habits to be acquired” (p.458). Likewise Lauren Phillips (2003), an elementary art educator, discusses how the caring attitude of the teacher and individual attention to students helps nurture empathy in the classroom, an attitude that her students emulate when working with their art and interacting with each other. Like learning how to behave positively in class, which is taught as an explicit goal as well as an implicit one, students must learn how to behave in caring and empathetic ways (Russell and Hutzler, 2007). This begins with the teacher modeling caring for and with her students.

As the teacher, my job in modeling empathy is to listen to students' responses in order to learn more about them and let that knowledge guide the lesson. For example, as students were discussing the final position, when the six students in the middle were facing out and had their backs toward each other, one boy suggested they could be in an airport. Another student commented to his neighbor, "I've never been to the airport-where do you sit?" At the same time, one of the six students crossed his arms once he had his back toward the others. When I asked him why he did this, he said, "I've got my back to him [indicating the boy directly behind him], I must be mad at him." These two comments reveal much about students' attitudes as well as their experiences. I let this knowledge of my students guide the next activity in the art lesson, for I now have a basis of their understanding of relationships to space. As the model for listening, I am careful to point out students who had similar responses, helping them form connections between each other through their experiences. Olsen (1998) says that personalization in the classroom and the chance to truly listen to students is a step towards developing a classroom where students feel cared about and cared for. Students feel respected when they are known (Olsen, 1998).

Now we move to the next step in aesthetic engagement in this lesson, inquiry and critique of Giacometti's *Piazza*. It was amazing the shift in tone from the role-playing game to viewing Giacometti's works of art. The class became silent and concentrated. Heidegger (1971) asserted that the arts, because of the aesthetic experience, can transport us to another line of thought, another way of being that we had not imagined before. He contends Van Gogh's painting of peasant boots is not just about capturing the color, texture, and line of the objects, but it is in the painting that we might learn something more about the boots. A painting, because it is more than the object, can cause us to imagine the life of the woman who wears the boots, of her turmoil and strife, enabling us to think beyond ourselves and imagine her life (Heidegger, 1971). He hints at the relationship between viewer and object, and that this interaction should encourage us to change and develop new perspectives (Hammermeister, 2002). Likewise, Green (1995/2000) contends that "the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination, to bring into being the "as if" worlds created by writers, painters, sculptors...and to be in some manner a participant in the artists' worlds" (p.4). Thus through the viewing, reflecting, and creating of artwork, students begin to develop their imaginative capacity to see another's world.

## Part 2

### *Inquiry into Piazza*

As students settle down to their assigned seats after the living compositions game, I ready my projector and begin to introduce the artist, Alberto Giacometti. I begin with a slide showing a picture of the artist at work, for I believe it is important for students to see the artists as real people. It is another part of developing an empathetic classroom. Artists are members of our

community, we should first and foremost see them as people, not define them only in their work. Following Feldman's (1994) method of critique, we begin by describing what we see and analyzing the formal elements. While formal elements are addressed, I do not end the critique at formalist aesthetics, which ignore the sociopolitical content and context (Tavin, 2007).<sup>2</sup> We view formal qualities to better understand how they attribute to our felt response and interpretations of the piece. Feldman's method is helpful in that the goal is to take time to look at the piece, to see more than we would normally see, invest ourselves in the piece, and delay the moment in which we make a judgment (Feldman, 1994).

It is important to note here that students do not follow the linear method (describe, analyze, interpret, judge) that Feldman's method of critique outlines. They jump around from making presumptions, coming to conclusions, and skipping over important details. It is the job of the art educator to moderate the dialogue and inquiry, directing students toward discovering meaning and backing up their discoveries with visual facts. Criticism is a search for meaning not a prescribed way of viewing a work of art (Feldman, 1994). If we want students to relate to a work of art, we need to begin where they are in their quest for understanding. Feldman (1970; 1994) also recognizes that there are certain truths contained in a work of art that can almost always be agreed upon; some meaning is unquestionable. For example, no matter our cultural or social background, Giacometti's *Piazza* cannot be interpreted as being triumphant or noble. Those meanings simply do not coincide with the visual qualities, nor with the artist's big idea. Unlike themes, big ideas anchor the meaning of the work. For an artist like Andy Goldsworthy, nature would be his theme (and media), while notions of time and change are his big ideas (Walker, 2001). However, while one person might find peace in the idea that the figures needn't interact to exist, another might find this idea disturbing and lonely. Both would be adequate interpretations because they relate to the visual qualities and the felt experience of the viewers.

Thus, the inquiry into *Piazza* needed to be directed towards the feeling of potential isolation and connection of the figures on the block. However, I didn't want to *give* the students this conclusion, they needed to form it for themselves, as this is Feldman's point in the *Practical Art Criticism* (1994) and the way in which art criticism can become an aesthetic engagement (Costantino, 2003). I begin with the same questions I used in the opening activity: Where could these people be? Are they interacting with each other or ignoring each other, and how do you know? What is the overall mood of the space? Students are quick to notice the piece feels lonely. "Why?" I ask. "Well," one girl uses her finger to trace the figures in the air, "they are like, um, skeletons. So skinny and tall." "Yes, that is how they look," I reply, but urge the class to look deeper. "What is lonely about tall, skinny figures? One of the figures we saw a minute ago [a tall, skinny figure who is poised at the peak of a graceful jump] didn't look lonely but its body was tall and skinny. Is there something else we can see?" Other students

give their input. “It’s that they aren’t walking toward each other, they seem like they don’t know other people are even there” a boy notices, coming up to the board and tracing their projected paths, “See, if they kept walking, they wouldn’t even touch.” Another quiet boy comments, “they seem dead even though they are moving.” We discuss what qualities make them appear dead. He refers back to the first girl who called them skeletons. Students build on each other’s responses. By constantly questioning them, encouraging them to look again, they begin to construct meaning relevant to their lives.

### ***Meaning, Empathy, and Care of the Self***

Gadamer (as cited in Costantino, 2003) asserted that truth can be contained in a work of art and “dialogue with a work of art can deepen our self-understanding and consequently identify a kind of truth” (p. 76). When Gadamer speaks of self-understanding he means the “recognition of the universal characteristics of human experience as well as the individual, unique, and personal experiences of the spectator” (Costantino, 2003, p.90). In the case of Giacometti’s work, there is a truth of human interaction and experience: that we can choose to relate to those around us, or we can choose to ignore those around us. It is to uncover these “universal characteristics of human experience” (Costantino, 2003, p.90) that we engage students in dialogue about art and encourage them in their own art making to explore these experiences and make sense of them.

By addressing human experiences like isolation, love, death, fear, and hope through art, we encourage students to share their own beliefs and values. Recognizing there are beliefs different from your own is an act of perception. When we approach this sharing with an ethic of care, we must work toward not only accepting others’ beliefs and being tolerant of them, but in seeking to understand the other in order to grow from the experience, to care and empathize. This is one of the explicit goals of the International Baccalaureate Organization’s curriculum for elementary school. The mission statement specifically addresses the need for students to be caring and open-minded to the lives of others:

International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people who help create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. To this end the IBO works with schools, governments, and international organizations to develop challenging programmes on international education and rigorous assessment. *These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right* [italics added] (IBO Mission statement, 2008).

The school where I currently teach is an IBO school and so this mission resonates with my teaching. Yet for students to develop this type of character, they need to be able to imagine those whom they may never meet. Empathy must go beyond the immediate relations in their lives if they are to be global citizens. This capacity is developed through imagination.

Phillips (2003) states “Empathy is a particularly powerful word because it involves identification and imagination...through imagination our perception of the other becomes our own reality” (p.46). Empathy is not learned through a series of rules or standards of action, but by imagining others “sufficiently to suffer and celebrate with them” (Gregory, 2000, p. 448). Empathy in this context is not only the ability to feel for another, but to imagine them clearly enough so that their lives and way of thinking become real to us. I agree with Maxine Greene that “imagination is the [cognitive capacity] that permits us to give credence to alternative realities” (1995/2000, p. 3). Richard Rorty affirms:

Human solidarity...is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing of sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people (1989, p. xvi).

Increasing sensitivity to particular details in order to gain meaning and be in relationship with the world is precisely the goal of aesthetic education (e.g. Dewey, 1934/1989; Heidegger, 1971). When we teach students to slow down, look, feel, think, and then act, we are assisting them in developing a sensitivity that helps them empathize and care.

This sensitivity is not about projecting my emotions into other, nor can I absorb their feelings somehow, but I can learn to be present in the moment, with my heart and my mind, and imagine, without agenda or prejudice, another’s pain or joy (Shertz, 2006). This more postmodern view of empathy, based on Merleau-Ponty’s (as cited in Shertz, 2006) concept of “dual-being” (p. 25), asserts that the separation between myself and another vanishes if I am being truly empathetic. Feldman (1970) calls this love—the “loving relationships virtually eliminate the distance between knower and known” (p.131). This type of empathy, care, and love begins with simple relationships, like those presented in this lesson. It begins with teacher and student, student and student, student and stranger, student and world. Gregory (2000) says that we achieve moral imagining through these types of progressive relationships. We first recognize others as acquaintances, then we learn to tolerate differences, soon we come to understanding them if we allow ourselves to receive them, then we care. Ideally, we learn to care for the whole of humanity, achieving solidarity.

Yet we can only learn to empathize and care through practice, not by mere thought and reflection alone. It is something that is learned by living and by setting your own code to live by. This is the premise of Foucault's theory of care of the self, in which he studied how the ancient Greeks set themselves series of actions, rules of conduct, and reflective practices to bring about transformation, "to make their lives an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault, 1984/1985, pp. 10-11). It was the Greek study into how we might create our lives as works of art. Like Foucault's earlier projects on governmentality, care of the self explores how individuals are governed, how they control, restrict, and regulate their bodies, minds, and relationships to others (St.Pierre, 2004). The purpose of cultivating oneself is as Foucault (1985/1986) states, "the common goal of these practices of the self...can be characterized by the entirely general principle of conversion to self—of *epistrophe eis heauton*. It is to be understood first of all as a change of activity...[it] implies a shift of one's attention" (pp.64-5).

It seems that the shift in one's attention here is not entirely inward, it is not a selfish act, which Foucault clarifies later. Care of the self immediately exists in relationship to others, one who cares for himself would "be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others" (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 287). Likewise, one who took proper care of himself would not become a tyrant or abuse his power because such a person has become "a slave of his own desires" (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 288). It is the shift in one's attention that opens up a space for transformation, for I interpret Foucault's writing here to be not just a shift from analyzing other to analyzing self, but a shift in *how* one looks at the self as something to develop. It is very much like how an artist shifts attention in producing a work of art. Thus, the goal of the art lesson is not to enforce a way of caring, but rather to help students begin their own formation of self; to create an opening for students to question how they relate to others. The classroom becomes a site for self-formation. In choosing *Piazza* as the focused work of art, rather than some other Giacometti sculpture, my intention is to encourage this interaction to occur. The invitation is not always welcome.

### ***Assessment and Implications***

At the end of the discussion of *Piazza*, before we begin figure drawing, I ask students to write a quick journal entry answering the following questions: When have you ever felt alone in a crowded room? When have you ever felt connected to a stranger? By asking these questions, I hope to engage their moral imagination. For in order to empathize, we have to 1) recognize the importance of relating to others (perceive), 2) let go of our preconceived notions of who to care for and who not to care for (receive), and 3) understand the structures that develop our mode of thinking about others and choose to break down those structures (act). The simple action of having students sit in chairs, point out ways in which people interact or do not interact according to their body positions challenges the social norm of public interaction.

Hopefully, they begin to ask themselves, why do I ignore other kids on my bus? What might happen if I smile and greet the people around me at a baseball game? Who says I have to remain silent in an elevator?

This entire first part of the lesson, the activity and discussion on *Piazza*, takes place in one, forty-five minute art period. The rest of the lesson is a basic figure sculpture lesson, where students create figures from aluminum foil and paper maché. This takes another three to four, forty-five minute art classes.

However, empathy and care are always present in the classroom. Because we are an IB school, our units and lessons are centered on our IB Learner Profile, or the type of learner stated in the mission statement (IB Learner Profile, 2006; IB Mission Statement, 2008). The profile is the type of student we want to form through education. IB learners are “inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective” (IB Learner Profile, 2006). Unlike character education traits, which are generally discussed through stories in literature or during social studies regarding civic duty, the learner profile is a way of teaching and learning, not just words or qualities to be understood. Teachers are also expected to be IB learners. The profile motivates the ways in which we *approach* learning, not just something to be learned.

Similarly, more schools are adopting social and emotional learning competencies as curricular aims to be taught and assessed. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2 as cited in Russell & Hutzler, 2007, p.7). Among the competencies are self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Like the IB profile, SEL acknowledges that emotional and social needs of students greatly impact the way in which they learn to perceive and respond to the world. When these goals of education are ignored, or passed over in favor of more rigorous academic learning, Hannah Arendt (1961) says that we no longer need to exercise judgment, develop our imagination, or cultivate an enlarged mentality. When we do not put care and empathy at the center of our teaching, we continue to allow students to pass through our doors without the set of skills that will help them lead happy, successful lives (Noddings, 2003/2005).



*Image 1.* Fourth grade students paper maché their aluminum foil armatures.

The art making portion of this lesson is a pretty basic elementary figure sculpture lesson. Students learn human figure proportions and create an armature from aluminum foil. From there, they build paper maché layers over the armature to give the figure shape and stability. We discuss the elements and principles of design, mainly balance, line, form, and unity. I have taught this type of lesson before, without the emphasis on

space and relationship that I stress here. I found that the students' artwork is not as emotionally engaging, that is, their figures are lifeless, more practices in sculpture than final sculptures with meaning. Watching my students work this time, I found myself looking at their artwork as finished artwork, worthy of the same conversation as Giacometti's piece. This influenced my own relationship to the students through art.

As an art teacher, it is easy to view the art I make for the students, examples of projects, exemplars showing stages of a finished piece, as not real artwork. I still had it in my head that real artwork is made outside the elementary classroom. Yet if I want my students to see themselves as artists, able to make art based on their daily life, their aesthetic experiences, I need to acknowledge the art they make as valuable to our community and society. It is their story, their narrative. Likewise, the art I make for them is the first encounter they have with art made by an adult. I must treat the art I make as examples of true artwork as well. While this aspect of research needs to be addressed further, I want to point out that I am still hesitant to call myself an *a/r/tographer*, knowing that the *a/r/tographer* embrace the role of art making as a way of inquiry into a phenomenon. I think my student might be there, but I have some work to do.

As a final assessment in this lesson, students are given three post-it notes. All the finished sculptures stand in a neat row on the tables, ready to be viewed and critiqued. Students are asked to rearrange the sculptures (in groups or in pairs) in two ways: by who goes together (e.g. all the athletes), and who doesn't go together. On their sticky notes they are to give the reasons why their first arrangement fits, why their second arrangement doesn't fit, and a way





Image 2. Student sculpture expressing a suspenseful mood.

in which the second arrangement *could* fit. This assessment helps me to see if students can now imagine new relationships between people they immediately perceive to be opposites. It is a simple exercise, but one that tells a lot about how much the students have internalized empathy. While they work on the assessment, I listen to their conversations. Many give creative and caring reasons why two figures who seemingly

don't belong together can now construct deep relationships. One pair of boys caught my attention as a perfect example.

One boy had made an army figure, complete with paper maché parachute hovering above his head. The other boy made a basketball player, reaching his arm high in an imaginary dunk. They paired their figures as not going together. But as they were challenged to think of ways they could fit together, they came up with an array of new relationships. "They could be brothers, one is fighting in the army and one is still in college, playing basketball," the first boy suggested. "Or, maybe the basketball player is raising money, you know how players do those special games, and the money's gonna go to help the guys in the army who get hurt," the second one imagined. The first boy added on to the idea, "Yeah, maybe the basketball guy had a dad or something who was killed in war and now he wants to help." The story evolved and the boys, who sit on opposite sides of my room and rarely talk to each other, were deep in imagining an elaborate plot involving their two now heroic and caring figures.

Springgay and Irwin (2005) discuss six renderings of a/r/tography (contiguity, living inquiry, metaphor, openings, reverberations, and excess) as ways to "inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing" (p. 899). Throughout this lesson, I encouraged my students to *inquire in the world* through their own art making and subsequent discussions and writings. We created an "opening," or "an engagement [with the research or art form] that relies on a multiplicity of perceptions" (p. 905) where "research is situated as a conversation for

understanding” (p. 906). I continue to relate to my students through their artwork and through the space we share as my art classroom.

Aesthetics as a practice in caring is about being attune to relationships. Making big ideas the focus of art inquiry and creation invites students to explore their own lives as sources of wonder, places of discovery, and works of art. In this lesson, an awareness of others’ physical presence invites students to explore a new definition of relationship and ultimately to imagine new relationships and ways of life. At the end of the assessment, I ask students to share their answers to the questions, when have you felt alone in a crowded room and when have you felt connected to strangers? A quiet girl who was new to the school this year said, “I have the same answer for both questions. In art. This year I didn’t know anyone and I just came to school, and...well, I just didn’t know anyone. But then we started making art together and I didn’t feel alone anymore. It was fun in here and I got to share my ideas...and well, it was easy to make friends.” I couldn’t have asked for a better way to conclude the lesson. Students all nodded their heads in agreement, apparently remembering their own times of feeling left out of the group and then suddenly welcomed. Because the arts are a natural place to engage in and reflect on aesthetic encounters, they become a vital space in which students can learn to empathize and care.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even though I began the lesson with this exercise, it is not meant to be a completely linear teaching style. Teachers wishing to address a big idea in their classroom need to be familiar with how their students respond to role playing, reflection activities, and sensory stimulus in order to judge how they might best enter into a space of conversation about a big idea like isolation or relationship. Often, students need the art making first in order to find the words needed for discussion (see Siegesmund, 1999; 2005 for more on this topic).

<sup>2</sup> Nor would Feldman want me to end my critique here. Often the process of critique is simplified in elementary art classrooms and ends with an assessment of formalistic qualities so that the students can move onto their lesson in pattern, line, etc. This overview comes from my many friendships and discussions with other art teachers. It is a realistic struggle in the classroom to keep students engaged, helping them “suspend judgment” long enough to truly perceive and receive a work of art. Likewise, I have had the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Feldman personally on this subject. Critique is a way to *relate* a piece of art, to not only view and perceive, but to question and trouble.

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