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Author(s): Bradford B. Venable
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Using Role Play to Teach and Learn Aesthetics

BY BRADFORD B. VENABLE

Teaching and Learning Aesthetics with Role Play

No introduction of aesthetics into an art classroom can begin without asking some important questions. What aesthetic concepts and issues are important for students to learn? What methods will be used to assess their progress? Should aesthetics be taught in conjunction with some other discipline? How often should aesthetics be taught, and what portion of the curriculum should be dedicated to it?

Answers to these questions, along with others, provide a framework that directs the course of aesthetic learning activities. This direction places aesthetics more substantially within the curriculum and provides an approach for its implementation (see Anderson & McRorie, 1997; Hagaman, 1988, 1990; Hamblen & Galanes, 1997; Parsons & Blocker, 1993).

While these considerations create a framework for directing an aesthetics unit, the individual teacher requires more. Concrete teaching strategies that translate educational goals into learning activities are needed. Although academic literature is replete with discussions of the importance of aesthetics as a classroom discipline, little is available that provides the art teacher with a practical guide to teach it. This article suggests role play as an important strategy for teaching and learning aesthetics.

Role Play Defined

Dramatic play in the school environment has been labeled by several terms. *Models*, *role play*, and *simulations* are among them. While these terms are often used interchangeably, some distinctions have been made.

Behavioral scientists borrowed the term "model" from physical science. Just as a scale model is constructed and

put through various conditions to test its strength, behavioral scientists develop symbolic models to explain and predict human behavior (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967). Model "simulations" (Guetzkow, 1962) need to be very realistic, reflecting real-world situations. Dramatic play, or rather *role play*, is the activity used within these symbolic models to allow participants and observers an opportunity to learn, to focus on how interactions are felt, to determine what happened, and why (Abella, 1986).

Shaftel and Shaftel (1967) define role play as "spontaneous improvisation." Further, they state that role play is a "group problem-solving method involving... (1) initial enactment of proposals (taking of roles), (2) observer reaction to the enactments (discussion), (3) exploration of alternatives through further enactments and discussion, and often (4) the drawing of conclusions or generalization and decision-making" (pp. 83-84).

Artist: I was told to make a sculpture.
I made the sculpture and that's it,
I did what I was told.
Student: Yeah, but you should have asked [about its appearance].
Artist: Why should I have asked?
Official: Because...
Student : Because that is what an artist does.
Artist : Because that is what an artist does? An artist makes art. They do not okay their art with people.
Official : You should have okayed it before you built it.
Artist : I should have okayed it? Who does Leonardo da Vinci have to answer to? No one.

Benefits of Role Play

Role-play activities are proven effective in a variety of learning situations including the development of language arts skills (Schickedanz, 1982) and math skills (Rees, 1990). Counseling students report greater sense of reality when instructors act out client behavior in a role play (Rabinowitz, 1997). Conflict resolution occurs when high school students use role play (Davis-Pack, 1989). It has also been identified as a positive method when working with gifted students (May, 1997).

More generally, role play is heralded as a method of securing important learning skills and attitudes. For example, the dialogue of role play has been viewed as a tool in achieving critical thinking (Gallo, 1989; Robertson & Rane-Szostak, 1996; Smith & Boyer, 1996; Venable, 1998). Additionally, role play is a versatile and cooperative learning activity that reduces student anxiety and promotes risk taking (Waters, Woods, & Noel, 1992).

Role Play and Art Education

Early examples of role play in art education occurred with Picture Study in the 1870s and 1880s. "Picture-posing" was an activity in which children mirrored the pose of subjects in a painting (Hurll, 1914). Though it lacked the dialogue of a role-play drama, this activity surely made learning more active and memorable.

Szekely (1997) promoted a wide range of role-play activities to enhance lessons in art history. As art experts, students could pretend to be gallery owners, curators, or historians. Students expressed ideas that went "beyond narrow views and personal interpretations."

Similar strategies were used with students to develop verbal skills in art criticism (Jones, 1995). In one example, students became an artist's agent. After studying works by "their" artist, students wrote a letter to a museum or art gallery describing the importance of the work.

These strategies offer learners an opportunity to more fully understand artists and their work. How can these ideas be used to learn aesthetics?

Inspiration for Aesthetics Activities

A student's term in art class, particularly at the middle and elementary level, is typically short. Role-play activities can focus on aesthetic issues without consuming time in preliminary discussion or student preparation.

Current events in the news offer a multitude of topics to be explored. Scandalous or unusual artwork; activities of artists, galleries, and museums; and reactions to any of these can furnish inspiration for role play. The media and how they reflect or define culture can be another important source.

Other resources such as *Puzzles about Art: An Aesthetics Casebook* (Battin, Fisher, Moore, & Silvers, 1989) provide dilemmas that may be transformed into learning experiences when students are motivated to pursue solutions via character roles.

Learning Goals for Students

Assessing the needs and learning goals of students is a prerequisite to any educational activity. Many art students lack the skills necessary to engage in aesthetic discussions.

First, students may struggle with verbalizing ideas concerning aesthetic issues. They volunteer comments enthusiastically, only to falter as they attempt to elaborate. Second, frequently there is an inability to cite examples or evidence in support of ideas. Scrutiny of their opinions will often end with students countering, "Well, that's just what I believe." Thus, two learning goals might be improved verbal skills and the development of reflective attitudes—where students logically consider alternative points of view and build rationale for their own ideas.

Third, many students do not see the relationship of art to anything beyond the classroom or view it as an essential academic pursuit. Art education for them is only meaningful with respect to art production. It is important that students see that thinking and learning about aesthetic issues can increase their awareness of the world. A final goal includes expanding student's appreciation of art as an essential endeavor and to see artists as significant participants in society. Role play provides a way to achieve these goals.

Role-Play Simulations in the Lesson Plan

Lesson plans using role play and focusing on an aesthetic dilemma typically include four steps:

1. Introduction. Teachers introduce a particular aesthetic concept, for example, some aspect of beauty, censorship, or interpretation. A scenario containing an aesthetic dilemma focusing on that concept is described.

2. Small-group work. Guided by open-ended questions students have an opportunity to explore different points of view and discuss how particular interested parties might react in the dilemma. In one class period, teachers assign roles to small groups. The group helps one member prepare to play "their" character by developing arguments and supportive evidence. It is conceivable that small-group activities be bypassed if students seem prepared to improvise roles or if limited time is available.

3. Large-group work. Role-play characterization is introduced here. Roles could be assigned at this point, or previously arranged roles discussed in the small groups could be played out. The audience may participate if their input would be advantageous.

4. Conclusion. Students benefit from a chance to internalize the class activity by reviewing how the discussion and role play related to the original concept. Responding to questions at the end of class either through a journal or class discussion is helpful.

Teaching Aesthetics, an Example

The controversy that surrounded Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in 1985 was inspiration for a role play initially focusing on art's definition and value. Serra's sculpture was a 10 ft. high, 120 ft. long, slightly curved piece of steel weighing over 73 tons. The use of public funding for the work and its appearance in a public location generated much controversy. Ultimately it was removed.

I hoped that this role play would help students better discover what issues influence an artwork's success. Such issues involving critical judgment are often inseparable from discussions that are aesthetic in origin. Other concepts such
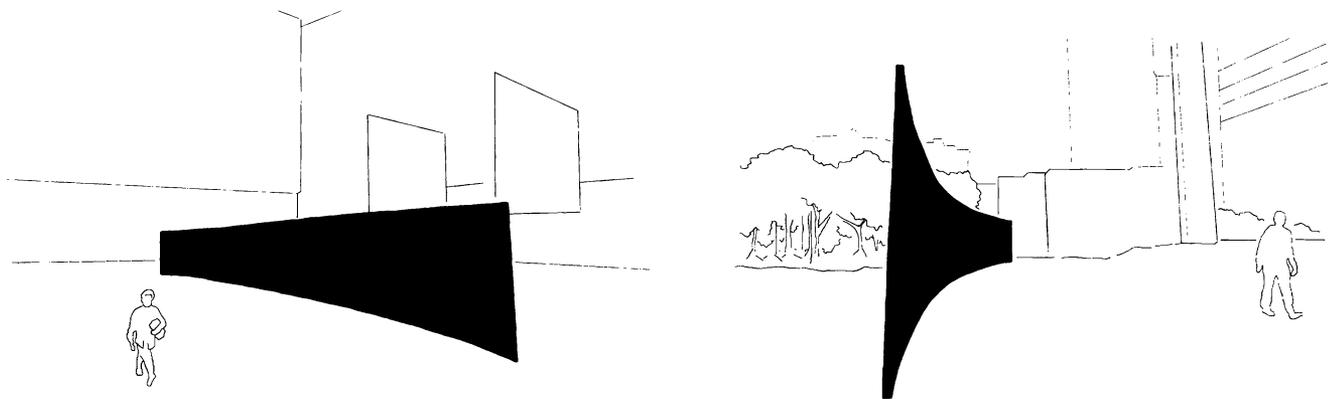
Two views of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

as censorship, artist rights, public opinion, and the relationship of beauty and art might also be encountered.

The simulation was carried out in a typical eighth-grade art class in a midwestern middle school. A dilemma was described in which an artist had been hired to create a sculpture for a public urban setting. Upon its completion, the work had caused much controversy because of its appearance and location. (Actual details of Serra's *Tilted Arc* and its removal were not revealed to the students until the end of the class.)

Characterizations for artist, proponent and opponent citizens, and community officials were created. In this case, players were assigned roles previously to allow them to prepare more thoroughly. The remainder of the class acted as community members who were encouraged to ask questions and offer opinions. During the discussion, students verbalized the assertions and beliefs of their characters. For example, in the following exchange, the "artist" defended his work:

> *Student*: Usually, a sculpture is not something that divides a room in half or takes up the whole space.
> *Artist*: Wait a second. What is this "usually a sculpture" stuff? People are all different. You can't say that usually a person has blonde hair.
> *Student*: You can't find a sculpture that is ten feet high and divides a place in half.
> *Artist*: How about Michelangelo's *David*? You can't find another sculpture that looks like that.
>
> In another exchange the issue of censorship was explored:
> *Artist*: I was told to make a sculpture. I made the sculpture and that's it, I did what I was told.
> *Student*: Yeah, but you should have asked [about its appearance].
> *Artist*: Why should I have asked?
> *Official*: Because...
> *Student*: Because that is what an artist does.
> *Artist*: Because that is what an artist does? An artist makes art. They do not okay their art with people.
> *Official*: You should have okayed it before you built it.
> *Artist*: I should have okayed it? Who does Leonardo da Vinci have to answer to? No one.[1]

Students also wrestled with the concept of free expression and where it should take place. For example, witness the exchange between the teacher and student:

> *Student*: If you want to have free expression, do it where people will want it.
> *Teacher*: Such as where?
> *Student*: Like in a museum. If you start to build a building like a school, you would expect them to have

rooms in it. If you build a plaza, you wouldn't have big piece of junk sitting in the middle of it.
> *Teacher*: So you're saying that there are places for free expression and places not for free expression. And this isn't a place for free expression. Free expression is only allowed in certain places?
> *Student*: Well, it's not only allowed in certain places, but if nobody has any problem with it then that's okay, but if someone has a problem with it, then it should be taken down.

Struggling with these ideas, students became active participants in creating meaningful learning (see Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). By taking on different roles, points of view were more readily expressed, scrutinized, and argued. Students were articulate, more open to alternative ideas, and able to distinguish credible arguments. However, it is difficult to assess if students developed a fuller appreciation of art and its relationship to life.

Later, issues from the aesthetics lesson reemerged in classes focused on art history and production. This suggests that some ideas stayed with the students and might lead to thinking beyond the domain of art.

Guidelines for Successful Role Play

Role-play activities do not guarantee learning. While students may participate enthusiastically, it is unwise to assume new understandings have developed. Several guidelines can help practitioners construct meaningful role-play activities:

1. **Preparation is crucial**. Consider the aesthetics concepts and plan the kind of simulation and roles that can best flesh these out. The dilemmas chosen should be timely and spark student interest.

Preparation will differ for various age groups. While little motivation will be needed for the enthusiastic middle-school student, high-school students may require a more sophisticated motivation to play particular roles. For them, teacher involvement in the discussion might be necessary. Elementary students, while needing little motivation to "play" at a role, may need more direction to stay focused. The aesthetic issues and dilemmas presented to them should be less complicated and shorter.

Finally, do not assume an introverted student will be less able to perform a particular role. Often, role play offers just the opportunity for these students to participate more fully in class.

2. **Be flexible**. Classroom discussion may not necessarily go as planned. Issues and concepts in aesthetics are inherently not cut and dry. While the initial focus may be on one aesthetic issue, others may emerge as important.

3. **Give limited guidance.** Be a facilitator of discussions rather than a leader. Allow students to direct the dialogue as much as possible. Occasionally, teachers may need to voice support for a losing argument or propose alternative ideas.

4. **Summarize and provide closure.** As the activity draws to a close, help students identify the main ideas, logical arguments, and supportive evidence used. A journal assignment or other individual activity will help students internalize their ideas and stimulate further discoveries around the issues discussed.

5. **Develop a variety of assessment methods.** It is better to consider role play as one part of the aesthetics unit that includes a variety of related activities. Journal or essay questions can link to discussions from the role play. Outside class assignments or projects may also be created as follow-up. Assess performance across all these activities for a more accurate measure of progress.

Regardless, it is important for teachers to decide what kind of learning is desired and how it might be demonstrated. Teachers might assess concept understanding or analytical thinking in tests or student writing. Observed application of aesthetic concepts in art history or artmaking activities could also be a part of an assessment model.

Conclusion

The role-play activities described here are best suited to learning in aesthetics that is philosophical and inquiry-based (see Sharer, 1986, 1987). Not all teachers and students are comfortable with this approach. Still, if aesthetics is valuable, teachers need to consider any technique that helps unlock potential learning. Role play offers one method that actively engages students and promises to bring about meaningful understanding.

Bradford B. Venable is an art teacher at Woodrow Wilson Middle School, Terre Haute, IN.
E-mail: bbv@galileo.vigoco.k12.in.us

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Obviously, da Vinci may have had to answer to many in his day. Historical information regarding this issue had not been presented prior to teaching aesthetics to this class. It is conceivable that the student's remarks regarding the modern concept of the unrestricted artist was learned elsewhere or is part the public's general "knowledge" base.