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Venturing into Unknown Territory: Using Aesthetic Representations to Understand Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Based on Elliot Eisner's notions of multiple forms of representation and Rosenblatt's aesthetic/efferent responses to reading, a teacher educator/researcher had her undergraduate students explore their connections, using aesthetic representations, to a course entitled *Reading Comprehension*. Each aesthetic representation revealed the complexities of *Reading Comprehension* in unique ways through a variety of media including: interior classroom design, culinary arts, quilting, music, and martial arts. The teacher educator invited five of the students from the course to participate in monthly collaborative inquiry sessions during the subsequent semester (lasting five months) where students articulated the aesthetic process they underwent. Benefits and applicability of using aesthetic representations in the university classroom are explored in the final section of the article.

Introduction

As a university professor, I have the wonderful, but often challenging, task of preparing prospective elementary teachers in the area of literacy. I found myself seeking a way to showcase the complexities of literacy development. No matter how many intriguing theoretical and practical readings I have listed in my syllabus, or how many field-based hours I require, or how many reflections I have my students write, the act of reading tends to be mistakenly considered as a series of somewhat mechanical tasks related to sound-symbol correspondence. Despite all of my traditional attempts (e.g., readings, assignments, lectures, and so forth), I have found that conveying the multilayered aspects of literacy may require the use of a nontraditional medium. How can we expand the spaces of learning about literacy so that future teachers may be more insightful about how “the reader of any text must actively draw upon past experience and call forth the ‘meaning’ from the coded symbols” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.22)?

This article is divided into four major sections: the literature review, an overview of the research study, the research results, and final thoughts. The first, second, and final sections of the article are primarily written in first person from my perspective as the university professor/principal researcher where I explore the role of aesthetics in reading, explain the context for this collaborative inquiry research, and provide implications and conclusions for K-16 practice and research. The results section, however, is written in first person by the five female undergraduate students/co-researchers who were enrolled in my *Reading Comprehension* course in the Fall 2005 semester.

Literature Review

Conveying Knowledge through Aesthetic Forms of Representation

In Serafini’s article (2001), he distinguishes among three paradigms of assessment—assessment as measurement, assessment as procedure, and assessment as inquiry. Serafini calls upon literacy educators to move beyond the first two paradigms because they are deeply rooted in positivist epistemologies treating knowledge as something that can be disseminated and objectively evaluated and as separate from the learner. The assessment-as-inquiry paradigm, on the other hand, treats knowledge and its relationship to the learner in a different way:

Knowledge is believed to be constructed by the individual within the social contexts of the learning event, rather than being acquired solely through transmission or direct instructional techniques. In this paradigm multiple

interpretations are encouraged, and each learner transacts with different texts and the world to create meanings. (Serafini, 2001, p.387)

In addition to examining our paradigms for assessing ‘knowledge,’ we must also examine how we as educators (de)value how to represent knowledge. For instance, Serafini’s article (2001) describes the use of writing portfolios and classroom-designed rubrics as two examples of moving toward the assessment-as-inquiry paradigm in the area of literacy; however, there was little mention of other ways to represent literacy knowledge apart from the written word. Eisner (1997) maintains that our school system over-emphasizes the *forms of representation* that involve “the skillful use of language and number, the venerable three R’s” (p.350)—Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic. While the three R’s are important, they do not sufficiently tap into what the mind is capable of doing. Efland (2004) points out that “If the purpose of education is to enhance the cognitive capabilities of individuals, it must offer experiences within domains calling for an array of abilities, and differing domains have differing structures requiring differing approaches in instruction” (p.756). Therefore, we must hearten educators to explore, validate, and implement *forms of representation* that go beyond our literal, linear, and quantifiable understandings of the world and expand our minds cognitively and aesthetically (e.g., through painting, dance, sculpture, poetry, etc.).

The Role of Aesthetics in Reading

Rosenblatt (1978, 1988, 1995) explains how a reader responds to text with use of a continuum. One end of the continuum consists of the *efferent response* where the “meaning results from an abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event” (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 5). According to Rosenblatt, the efferent response to text is predominantly *public* due to the reader’s focus on the more literal and conventional aspects of meaning. On the other end of the continuum, the *aesthetic response* is predominantly *private* because the reader tends to “focus on the experiential qualities of what is being evoked during the reading event and give more attention to the private aspect, the personal aura in which the referential is embedded—sensations, images, feelings, emotional, and intellectual associations” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 350).

In part, where we fall on the continuum of efferent (public) versus aesthetic (private) response depends on the context, or space, while engaged in the act of reading. Spaces have “commonly accepted parameters of what constitutes an appropriate (public or private) reading of text (or of self-as-text)” (Calderwood, 2005, p. 4). Calderwood states that we “have undergone extensive and rigorous training to guard against being slightly moved, or, more dangerously, deeply moved during reading, especially during a reading that takes place in public space” (p. 7). Self-as-text is often “composed in a private space,

one well guarded. . . . This private space is accessible to others only by invitation” (p. 8). Due to the public nature of the classroom and our conditioning to guard our most private selves, we tend to approach reading from an efferent stance. We are less comfortable with assuming an aesthetic stance in which we ourselves become “a text that might be read by others” (p. 7). However, Calderwood urges educators to make spaces where students feel comfortable enough to “risk” aesthetic responses to reading and other learning processes. For example, literacy researchers like Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) encourage classroom teachers to make multiple forms of representation like drawing a part of the reading and writing curriculum¹.

The Research Study

Setting the Stage

In teacher-preparations programs, university professors all-too-often focus on the conventional and literal course content and our *public* understandings of that content. As students move up through the grade levels and into university settings, they become increasingly used to demonstrating their knowledge through teacher-made and teacher-initiated assignments, projects, and assessments (e.g., quizzes, tests). As a teacher educator, I wanted to challenge the junior- and senior-level students enrolled in my course (entitled *Reading Comprehension*) to go beyond the literal, surface-level understandings and to invite more *private* connections regarding how we comprehend and construct meaning from and through texts. One course assignment, in particular, forced many of my students out of their usual comfort zones where they had grown accustomed to being evaluated on their *efferent* responses to course material, as opposed to their *aesthetic* ones. The culminating assignment for this course, however, was unlike others that they had experienced before: an aesthetic representation of the course².

Methodology: A Collaborative Inquiry

In order to examine the potential power of representing the complexity of reading comprehension using aesthetic representations, the following two research questions emerged at the onset of this collaborative research study:

1. How do junior- and senior-level students represent reading comprehension aesthetically?
2. How do they articulate the process they went through and their connections to the course?

To examine the research questions, I invited six students who were enrolled in my Fall 2005 *Reading Comprehension* course to participate as co-researchers in a qualitative research study to take place the following semester (Spring 2006). Unfortunately, one

student was unable to commit to the semester-long study due to time constraints. In the semester following the Reading Comprehension course, the remaining five students eagerly volunteered to participate in this research study as co-researchers. At the time of the study, they were seeking generalist and/or special education certification at the elementary school level.

Eisner (1987) reminds us that:

Our culture is replete with a variety of forms of representation because humans have found it necessary to invent such forms in order to express what they want to convey. The curriculum of our schools is the major means through which our children learn the 'languages' of these forms, and it is by learning these languages that they gain access to the kind of experience that the forms make possible. (p.9)

Keeping in mind that every form of representation has the potential to reveal facets of reality that others inherently conceal (Goldstein, 2002), I chose to invite these particular undergraduate students to participate in the study because of the varying forms of representation they used: interior classroom design, culinary arts, quilting, music, and martial arts. Each representation was different not only because of the students' individual experiences and connections to reading comprehension, but also because of the chosen medium and its capacity to reveal aspects that may not be perceived outside of that medium. For example, Rose's quilted wall-hanging which literally and metaphorically depicted a journey of reading comprehension was made public as soon as it was unveiled to the class. By contrast, Yvonne's martial arts demonstration which more figuratively symbolized reading comprehension was intended to unfold over a period of time as she moved across the classroom floor with deliberate movements and rhythmic breaths. The aforementioned forms of representation do not inherently have the same capacity to reveal or conceal the same aspects of reading comprehension.

The research involved five monthly group meetings (averaging one to one-and-a-half hours each session), individual meetings, and reflective essays. I served as the principal investigator of the study and the facilitator of the group and individual meetings. The students/participants in this research study had several roles including former students reflecting on a past course, research participants in the study, and, lastly, co-researchers/co-authors. We utilized collaborative inquiry as our research design (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000). Collaborative inquiry involves "the systematic examination through dialogue of a body of data and lived experience by researchers whose intentions include the construction of formal knowledge that can contribute to theory" (Group_for_Collaborative_Inquiry & thINQ, 1994, p. 58). While collaborative inquiry offered a framework for our overarching questions regarding the process involved in conceptualizing, creating, and sharing aesthetic representations, we actually drove the research "as individuals cycl[ing] through dialogic reflection" (Dray, 2005, p. 45). We

met and discussed the importance of engaging in a self-reflective journey that explored several topics, such as their personal experiences—or lack thereof—with alternative forms of representation in our academic careers, the vast range of aesthetic representations that were created in the class to represent reading comprehension, and the process they went through in creating their representations.

At the initial meeting, we agreed to meet as a group at least once a month from January to May 2005, to continue exploring the students' experiences with the aesthetic representations of reading comprehension, looking at the process students underwent while conceiving and creating the aesthetic representations. We also decided that the students/co-researchers would write reflective essays as an attempt to capture the most salient aspects of the process. In a recent study that explored how two pre-service teachers constructed positive images of themselves as future teachers of writing through active reflection, the researcher (Stockinger, 2007) found that reflecting through writing allowed students to examine “their prior beliefs and images, or ‘mental models,’ as they formed new beliefs and images” (p.219).

The reflective essays turned out to be the most important data sources for this study for several reasons. First, the essays revealed how students articulated their experiences in written form which simultaneously ran counter to and complemented the original course assignment where only a brief description of less than forty words was provided³. Second, the essays served as springboards for discussions in our follow-up collaborative inquiry sessions. Quite organically and inadvertently, subsequent collaborative inquiry sessions transformed into a writers-workshop type atmosphere where we shared the essays and gave one another feedback—albeit asking for more details about a specific aspect or reminding the essayist of an important connection they may have unknowingly left out. For example, some of the participants who read Yvonne's original draft of her Karate essay reminded her to include the journal entry that she had read to the class just before her open-hand *kata* performance. Third, as a result of the essays, the students began to take their reflections deeper. For example, students started to email subsequent drafts of their essays to the group and to request additional one-on-one or small-group meetings with me to see if their essays captured the queries of the group. Last, the constant back-and-forth nature of the essay revisions and the collaborative inquiry sessions helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. As opposed to having the participants' experiences taken away to be interpreted and ventriloquated by an outside researcher (which so often happens in academic research), member-checking (Merriam, 1998) was an inherent aspect of the collaborative inquiry sessions where participants/co-researchers had opportunities to continually clarify and expound upon their own experiences, understandings, and interpretations.

Results

Given the nontraditional nature of this assignment asking students to risk *aesthetic* responses in the *public* nature of our classroom, there was much resistance and tension surrounding the aesthetic representations. Dewey (1934) notes that artists take advantage of moments of resistance and tension:

Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total. (p.15)

Out of these challenging moments, students were able to cultivate new understandings of reading comprehension and their place within it. The following themes were touched on repeatedly during the collaborative inquiry sessions and in the reflective essays: (1) out of comfort zone, (2) student voice throughout the aesthetic process, and (3) connections to reading comprehension.

The first theme of students being out of their comfort zone was evident in students' descriptions of "banging their heads against the wall" trying to figure out what to do and/or how to connect it to reading comprehension. Especially considering that this assignment was different than the typical traditional assignments students encounter in teacher preparation programs, there were many feelings of tension and ambiguity in relation to this assignment whether students knew the medium they would employ or not. In their reflective essays below, the first three students/co-researchers echo a similar sentiment of "banging their head against a wall" when trying to come up with the appropriate aesthetic medium for their representations. They described their initial responses to the assignment as "frustrating," "long and complicated," and "uncomfortable," respectively. Even though the last two students/co-researchers knew what media they were going to choose (i.e., music and Karate), they still struggled with how to connect these media to reading comprehension.

While student voice is often lacking in traditional types of class projects and assignments, the second theme affirmed the prominence of student voice in and ownership of the aesthetic representations, how they were presented to the class, and how they were discussed throughout the study. As the reflective essays later in this section indicate, student voice was demonstrated in many ways—albeit through choosing an artistic medium that had special significance in their lives—like Jennifer playing clarinet, or personal anecdotes like Rose recounting the important role her first grade teacher played in her literacy development and academic aspirations.

The third and final theme of how students connected their aesthetic representations to reading comprehension brings us full circle as to why students were asked to create them in the first place. In her reflective essay, Brittaney states that the lack of explicit instructions from the professor “allowed me to be creative and give my final representation a personal touch that I can say was truly unique to my interpretation of what reading comprehension was to me.” Their personal interpretations of reading comprehension were as prominent as they were unique.

In this section, the five students/co-researchers share the reflective essays that resulted from the collaborative inquiry study. Along with the final version of the reflective essays, each sub-section includes: (a) a brief introduction to the essay that highlights the aesthetic/efferent response continuum, (b) the title, (c) the medium, (d) a brief description of the aesthetic representation as it was presented to their classmates on the last day of the course; and (e) a brief student biography.

Brittaney’s “Wild about Books”

By refurbishing a once-dull library center in her field-experience elementary classroom, Brittaney showcases the potential role of aesthetics in the classroom. According to Brittaney and her cooperating teacher, students did not engage in much aesthetic reading during center time before the library center’s makeover. As a direct result of making the library center attractive, fun, and inviting for students, they willingly and consciously were going into the library center to read—for pleasure. Brittaney used her field-experience classroom as the canvas for her aesthetic representation and saw a direct correlation between student motivation and aesthetic reading.

Title: Wild about Books

Medium: Interior classroom design

Description: I would like to redecorate my [field-placement] students' literacy center. If they enjoy reading more, all areas of their reading will improve, including reading comprehension.

Biography: My name is Brittaney Smith; I have lived in San Antonio long enough to call it my home. I am currently seeking my Bachelors in early elementary education with a specialization in special education. I hope to work in the elementary setting.

Reflective Essay:

Creating an aesthetic representation is something that didn’t come easily to me. In order to create a thoughtful aesthetic representation, I went through a period where I “banged my head against the wall.” I will be the first to admit, the initial process was quite

frustrating. The lack of directions from the professor forced me to think outside of the traditional box I was use to. It was difficult for me to think of a product that would represent reading comprehension without any direct instructions about what the final product should look like. As I look back on the project, I think the lack of explicit directions was the best part. It allowed me to be creative and give my final representation a personal touch that I can say was truly unique to my interpretation of what reading comprehension really meant to me.

After internalizing the question: “What does reading comprehension mean to me and the students I am working with?” I chose to take a more literal approach and update the existing reading center in the elementary classroom where I was doing my fieldwork. Sadly, the reading center was the students’ least favorite center in the class. It rarely got used and was not inviting to the students. There were minimal pillows for the students to use, and the books were simply placed on the shelves, in no particular order. After consulting with my cooperating teacher, I decided to give the reading center a jungle theme. The general premise behind this was, if the literacy center is more appealing to the students they will want to read more and thus, all areas of their reading will improve, including their comprehension. My ultimate goal for this project was to make the center more appealing to the students. I wanted them to enjoy reading in the literacy center, and have a desire to actually use it. I thought by adding pillows, rugs and greenery, I would make the center more visually appealing, comfortable, and enticing for the students.

For my center I made pillows from inexpensive material that I purchased at Wal-Mart. I also created flowers from colored tissue paper. I constructed vines from butcher paper, which I hung from the ceiling and wove between tubs of books. I also created grass by cutting slits in green paper and I taped it along the bottom of the bookshelves. This center was rather inexpensive to create and yet I was amazed to see how the students responded to it. They were overjoyed to see their new center, and each student was anxious for their turn to read in the center. The most rewarding part for me was the excitement for reading that was generated within the classroom. My cooperating teacher also commented on an unexpected benefit: students’ newfound enthusiasm toward reading in general.

Rose’s “Piecing it All Together”



Rose’s quilted wall hanging uses the metaphor of a journey to academic success both literally and figuratively. While her aesthetic representation shows a path going in one direction, her rich descriptions of significant educators seem to cycle back when she explains her desire to be like her first-grade teacher.

Although her essay is cyclical in nature, her aesthetic representation demonstrates the tendency that pre-service teachers have to present content in a somewhat linear fashion and chronological sequence (because that is how most of us have been conditioned to demonstrate our understanding).

Title: Piecing it All Together

Medium: Quilting

Description: A wall hanging depicting my first grade reading teacher who sought out a particularly shy student and thus began my journey on the road of success.

Biography: I was born and raised in San Antonio. I am one of six children. I am a single, Hispanic female and have no children. I have always wanted to teach and be a strong influence for children.

Reflective Essay:

When I first heard Dr. Cuero explain the aesthetic representation assignment, I went through a range of emotions and many questions went through my mind. What is an aesthetic representation? Where do I begin to represent reading comprehension and its effect on me personally while connecting it to this course? The process of deciding how to represent Reading Comprehension aesthetically was a long and complicated one. After weeks of thoughts going through my mind and changing my mind repeatedly, it finally

hit me! My most memorable event in my education occurred in first grade. As a young child, I was an extremely timid child who would be found quietly sitting at her desk reading. My first grade teacher noticed my love for reading and encouraged it by providing me with my own set of books. She gave me the best gift I have ever received: an ever-growing love for reading! This gift represented acceptance, from not just anyone, but my teacher who I greatly respected. The conclusion I made regarding my aesthetic representation was, “No matter what medium I chose, it had to represent my 1st grade teacher’s intervention in my education, which lead me to yearn for success.” These pieces I put together also represent how children learn to read. As I have observed, learning to read is about small pieces, (e.g. decoding words, fluency, graphophonic knowledge, syntax, etc.) which are put together to form a bigger picture of successful reading, which is comprehension. My success began with reading.

I titled my aesthetic representation *Piecing It All Together* because it takes the caring, nurturing heart of a teacher to help a child put the pieces together for a successful future. I chose to do a quilted wall hanging as the medium for my aesthetic representation. The primary colors in the fabric represent the timeframe: during my primary school years when I first realized that, if I wanted to be successful, this is where I would build my foundation. The wall hanging begins with the depiction of a schoolhouse. The schoolhouse represents the starting point on the road for future success. It was in school where I discovered my love for reading. There is also a *Dick and Jane* book, which is the first book I recall reading successfully. There are also small hands to represent those teachers who dedicate their time to take children by the hand and open up a world of opportunities for them. Step-by-step, my early successes in school sent me down the road, which led to college. Although this road has had its challenges along with ups and down, mostly it was full of rewards. The final step of my representation is the UTSA mascot. The mascot represents a milestone. It took many wonderful teachers to encourage, motivate, and guide my success along. But the most memorable will always be the one who sought me out as a shy, little girl.

This wall hanging will be displayed in my classroom and I intend to explain its significance to my future students. I will explain that I, too, can help guide them down the road of their own personal successes if they will allow me to take their hands. Reading is a journey as is education. Reading and education go hand-in-hand. Reading encompasses everything from information, to entertainment to education. You cannot have one without the other. It is my passion for reading, which has brought me to choosing this career. I want to be able to reach students and lead them down their paths of greatness and success. The basic foundation provided to me by my first grade teacher has taken me to a place that I never thought was possible. Reading allows me the opportunity to be someone else, to dream, to laugh, to cry, to be scared, and to be happy. I want to be

able to share that with another child. This is what all teachers need to do in order to be successful. They need to intervene with a caring, warm, and nurturing heart. Mine did.

Michelle’s “The Bakery”

Despite the fact that Michelle had always demonstrated a knack for reading, she never really found joy or responded to it aesthetically. On the contrary, she saw reading more as a chore to gather information for efferent purposes. Even her aesthetic representation of baking cakes looked at reading comprehension from an analytical standpoint—analyzing the types of and quality of miscues (e.g., omitting, substituting, or mispronouncing a word) readers make. During the study, Michelle started to reflect on why she had, for the most part, relegated reading as solely an efferent activity. Through reflection, she began to identify the types of books that had moved her to respond aesthetically and realized that not all reading necessitated efferent responses.

Title: The Bakery

Medium: Culinary arts

Description: A display of cakes in a "bakery" that considers the relationship between reading problems and recipe making.

Biography: Michelle is currently studying at the University of Texas at San Antonio where she is pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming an educator. After graduation, she plans to continue to live and teach in the San Antonio area.

Reflective Essay:

As a child, I was always an excellent reader and enjoyed the opportunity to read aloud frequently in class. To this day, people comment on how I read with such expression and I take personal pride in my “talent.” In fact, I notice that I kind of read ahead of myself on the page, making sure that I will be able to pronounce all of the words by the time I get to them. Being a studious and resolute student, I was deeply committed to performing well in school. I came to see reading as a subject in school, irrelevant to my personal life and definitely not something that I would do for fun. As a student, I don’t ever remember anyone asking me what I would like to read. I read . . . so that I could learn how to read. Reading was about learning words or gathering information.

Approaching this aesthetic representation and reading comprehension in general was really uncomfortable for me. To be honest, making personal meaning out of this project was the last thing on my list of concerns. I just wanted to do something and get it over

with. Playing the piano or POETRY! I've done that a million times before. I could minimally prepare, present it, and go on with my life. I couldn't really connect. I couldn't make it work. The part that was missing for me was passion. I didn't really care about reading. Deep inside, reading didn't matter to me.

One day, as if from out of the sky, I settled on cake baking. I don't know for sure what made me decide that to begin with. I know some cool tricks about substitutions that work for making cakes. I like to entertain. I enjoy cooking. One thing is for sure, once the idea came to me, the sparks began to fly and my mind created an endless list of connections I could recreate.

My aesthetic representation focused on different aspects from the course. The first cake was baked following the original recipe, representing fluent reading with good comprehension. Two of the cakes represented some of the common reading miscues that students may make while reading: In a second cake, I substituted applesauce for the oil, representing a high-quality substitution like when a student reads "house" instead of "home", as opposed to a low-quality substitution such as "horse" for "home" which completely changes the meaning of the text. The resulting cake was very similar to the first. In a third cake, I demonstrated what a low-quality "omission" looks like in reading by leaving out eggs. The product was a flat, gritty, grainy cake.

To represent students who overly rely on a single reading strategy (such as sounding out words), I replaced all liquid ingredients in the fourth cake with water which produced a flat, crumbly cake. In order to demonstrate what happens when people are attempting to read at the graphophonic level (or read word-by-word), without fluency and comprehension, I baked a cake and allowed it to mold. Finally, I frosted a box to express my view of accurate "reading" without comprehension, because it may look great on the outside, but it is hollow on the inside.

I presented this to my class in a bakery format, placing the cakes around a table and naming them with signs that described the relationship I found. I then invited the class to peruse the bakery. Class members commented that the relationships between the cakes and reading comprehension were very clear. I thought I had chosen the medium of baking to represent my understanding because I love baking and felt ever so passionate about it. I was satisfied with that. Sure. It worked. But then . . . as a result of the collaborative inquiry meetings, my professor ever-so-gently suggested something like, "You know? You said that you chose to express it this way because baking is something that you love. You say you don't really like to read because it is about gathering information. But then, you represented common miscues and surface-level reading. I could be wrong, but maybe there is something to that."

Then, I realized that reading isn't about getting it right. It's not about getting a grade. It's about finding your reading personality, finding what you love. I love to read books that mean something to me. I love books that I can relate to and that helps me to connect with real pain, real people, real life situations. I love books with dialogue and conversation—books with “voice.” I don't like them too long or too wordy. It intimidates me. I can't wait 496 pages for an ending. I need it within 150 or so. That's me, my reading personality. Since realizing that I had always viewed reading as necessary drudgery, I have freed myself to explore reading for pleasure. Since then, in the last few weeks, I have read three novels, from cover-to-cover. I don't recall ever, in my 27 years of life, finishing a novel of my own free will. Never!

Exploring reading comprehension aesthetically has changed my own perspective about reading. If I had just gone through this class without the aesthetic aspect, I would have gained some good information and another grade on my transcript, but my own attitude and personal convictions would never have changed. Connecting with my own attitudes and perspectives about reading comprehension did something for me that a lecture or interactions with a struggling reader could never do. But now, since I've wrestled with it, I've figured it out! If I want my students to love reading, I won't make it about “getting it right.” I won't make it about a “grade.”

Jennifer's “Sound on Paper”

In the following reflective essay, Jennifer describes how she played the clarinet for the class while making complex associations between reading text and reading music. Her previous drafts of the reflective essay were four times longer than the final version. With such a treasure trove of knowledge of and experience with reading, playing, and living music, she desired to define every unfamiliar term and explain every sophisticated connection she made between reading music and text to us non-music-readers.

Despite the fact that you will not find the following particulars in Jennifer's reflective essay, I feel compelled to mention one of the most striking revelations made during the collaborative inquiry sessions regarding the aesthetic/efferent continuum. During Jennifer's presentation to the class and during the collaborative inquiry sessions, she commented on the fact that she had always seen reading music as having a script and definite parameters. For her, a sheet of music coupled with a composer, or teacher, indicated how to interpret the music, when to play softly or intensely, and even when to take a breath.

Unlike Jennifer, her husband who was the leader of their rock band did not know how to read music and did everything by feel, by ear, and by experimentation. Jennifer commented that she yearned to be freer when playing music and strived to be more expressive like her husband. When comparing their two approaches to music, we noted that Jennifer's approach to music had many similarities to how Rosenblatt describes efferent responses to reading. Due to her lack of venturing out and feeling the music for its own sake, her comfort zone was limited to how others told her to interpret the music and how it was to be performed. Her husband, on the other hand, was not bogged down by efferent expectations. He perceived, responded, and shared his music for more aesthetic purposes.

Title: Sound on Paper

Medium: Music

Description: Music to me is directly related to reading comprehension because to play music not only did I have to learn how to read it, but I had to learn another language.

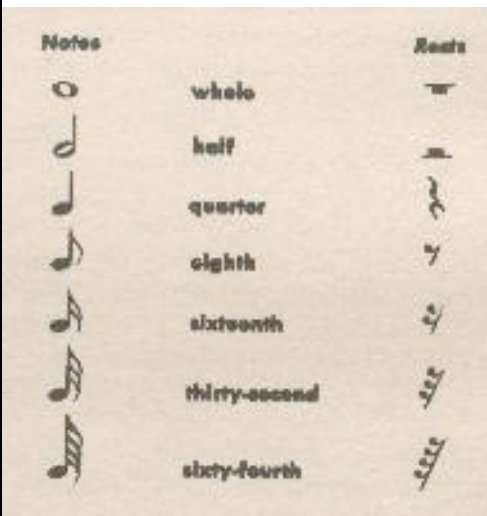
Biography: I am a senior at the University of Texas at San Antonio graduating with an EC-4 generalist teaching degree. I have always had a passion for music and started playing the clarinet about 17 years ago in 6th grade.

Reflective Essay:

For me, music is life. I do not go a day without playing, listening to, or watching live music. I play the clarinet for UTSA, drum for a rock band, and see at least two live shows a month. So, it was not hard for me to decide that music would be involved in my aesthetic representation, but I was not sure I could come up with a decent presentation.

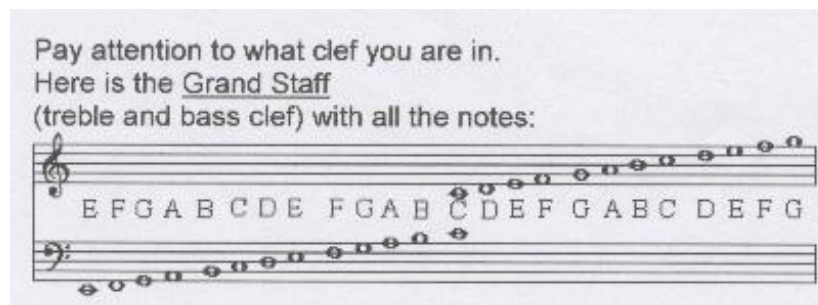
First, I had to ask myself, "What does all my knowledge of reading and playing music have to do with COMPREHENSION?" Reading is such a complex process. With practice and exposure, children develop understanding so that they may begin to comprehend stories better. Students begin to read stories that are longer, have deeper meanings, hidden messages, similes, metaphors, and even understand very difficult vocabulary. In music as you begin to understand how to read music better you can move to more in depth types of music. Much like when people first begin to read, they start off with very simple stories that have about one sentence per page. In music you also start off very simple songs like *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, and *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Once you understand the basics of music you can begin to explore more complex music and attempt to move up in your abilities.

I had to figure out how I was going to explain this to my UTSA class in a short presentation. It just didn't seem possible to explain how to read music and to play a piece of music in a six minute presentation. I did not realize how much explaining was necessary in order to demonstrate how to read what I felt was a simple piece of music. I decided on a pretty piece called *Yorkshire Ballad* that the band had performed in a concert the week before. I made a transparency copy of this piece, of the musical alphabet, the grand staff, and the fingering chart for the clarinet. I really wanted the class to try and read along as I played small sections of the music, so that they could see and experience what it was like to read music. I started at the beginning of the song and explained all the words and symbols up until the boxed number 1; I then played up to the number one as the class tried to read along. I then explained from the boxed number 1 to the boxed number 2, and played it while the class tried to follow along. This is how I presented the whole piece.



I felt that a good portion of the class gave up trying to read after the first section of music was played. This is probably very similar to how most young students feel with their first attempts at reading. Some of my classmates seemed to really try to understand and read along with the music. This is pretty much how I expected it to go, and I'm not sure how much the class learned.

I hope everybody learned at least a little something new about reading music and gained a new perspective on the struggles young students go through as they learn to read. This was a great experience for me; it has helped me to see reading comprehension in a whole new way. Aesthetically representing reading has helped me remember what it feels like to learn something new and foreign, and helps me relate better to the students and their struggles as I teach.



Note: All symbols and definitions found at <http://www.numbera.com/musictheory/theory/notation.aspx>

Yvonne’s “Reading, Thinking & Karate-ing”

Yvonne was one of the few students who knew the medium that she would use, but she did not know how she would connect it to the course. Once she reflected on how much reading and writing her Grandmaster required of his Karate students, she came to realize that her love of Karate goes beyond a shared activity with her son and a way to stay physically active. The manner in which the Grandmaster incorporated literacy into the martial art allowed her aesthetic appreciation for its history and its impact on her life to grow.



Click to Play Video

Title: Reading, Thinking, and Karate-ing

Medium: Martial arts

Description: I will be performing a *kata* from my Karate class. The ties to reading comprehension in my karate class incorporate reading, writing, and metacognitive processes.

Biography: I was born and raised in San Antonio. I am a single parent of a twelve-year-old son. My passion has always been to work with children and make a difference in their education.

Reflective Essay:

I joined the American Tang Soo Do Karate school two years ago because my son wanted me to join. My twelve-year-old son has been in Karate for seven years. I was very skeptical about joining because my past experiences have always been in other arts like music, dance/cheerleading, and drama—never Martial Arts. Although I was unsure of the strict discipline structure and my athletic ability to perform karate, I decided that joining would be a great activity to share with my son. Luckily my dance and cheerleading background helped me with my form. After joining two years ago, I have become much more athletic and have gained more confidence and discipline than I had expected.

Besides my newfound athleticism, I learned that reading, writing, and research play an integral part in our training. In my Dojo (karate school), all the students must purchase a student handbook. The handbook teaches about our founders, our style, our school creed, our disciplines, our *katas* (forms), the Korean terminology used, and our requirements for

belt advancement. Our Grandmaster or other Blackbelts often test our knowledge which requires us to consult the handbook and other sources (e.g., books, internet, etc.). The students must answer in essay or poetry form and turn in to the Grandmaster as either a typed paper or a hand-written journal entry.

Unlike many of my university classmates, I knew which medium that I was going to choose for my aesthetic representation: an open hand *kata*. A *kata* demonstration was the best way to represent myself aesthetically. The hard question was: How was I going to tie Karate to reading comprehension?

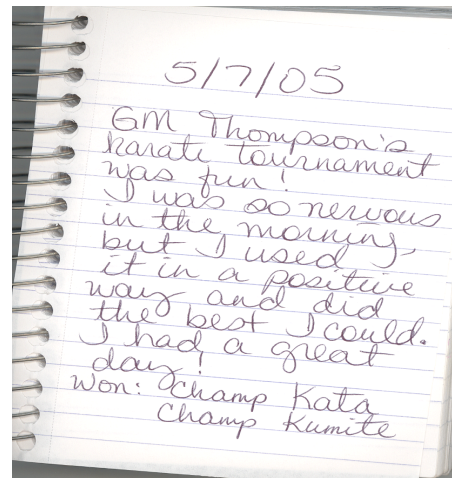
Until joining, I had not envisioned that reading and writing played such a major role in Karate. To be honest, I just thought it was like any other sport. To begin brainstorming for my aesthetic representation, I started off by writing a list of everything we do in our Dojo that involved reading and writing: reading the handbook and other books or internet sites; answering essay questions; writing poetry; reflecting in our journals after each class, and turning in our report cards at the end of each grading period. As I wrote my list and gathered the information, I answered my question of tying Karate to reading comprehension.

On the day of my demonstration for Reading Comprehension, I dressed in my traditional white uniform and orange belt and took my place in the center of the classroom. All eyes were on me as I gently slid my feet in crescents along the floor; took deep breathes to release the energy that flows from one transition to another; displayed various blocks, punches, and kicks; and returned to an upright, quiet, and serene disposition.

After the *kata*, I shared an acrostic poem that I wrote when I began karate:

Knowledge
Aspire
Respect
Accomplish
Transform
Encourage

I also shared one of my journal entries that was written after my first karate tournament describing my feelings before and after the tournament.



I truly enjoyed the aesthetic representation. I was a bit anxious about how to tie karate to reading comprehension, but once I put the information together everything just fell into

place. In doing this aesthetic representation I was able to see parallels between literacy and karate. I realized how much my Grandmaster incorporates literacy and academics into the corporal aspects of Karate in order to deepen our knowledge of self, the art itself, and the history behind it.

The fact that the university professor couldn't tell us how to do it was challenging until you actually do it. When it all comes together, the process of the representation makes sense. Participating in and seeing other aesthetic representations was fun for me because I have always been comfortable representing myself in artistic forms. However, I noticed that some of my other classmates were much more reserved and really took a long time to figure out how to express themselves aesthetically. The aesthetic representations forced everyone to open up in a different way. As a result, we had the opportunity to see each other in different ways—comical, spiritual, loving, family-oriented, driven, and artistic.

Final Thoughts

As future teachers, each student captured the uniqueness of her understandings of reading comprehension via her *private* response in the *public* space of the classroom. Students affirmed that the aesthetic representations yielded greater insight into the sociocultural and affective aspects of literacy development. Although expanding the spaces for learning using aesthetic representations proved to be a formidable challenge, rich metaphors surfaced as the classroom was transformed into a classroom reading corner, a patchwork journey, a bakery, a recital hall, and a Martial Arts *Dojo*. I argue that the rich metaphors and *private* connections presented in the reflective essays would not have surfaced in the absence of the aesthetic representations, because traditional coursework is typically geared to eliciting *effluent* responses to course content.

As evidenced in the reflective essays, the five students/co-researchers' reflections demonstrate the power of having university students venture into the unknown territory of using aesthetic representations to understand reading comprehension. When given the opportunity, these students/co-researchers showed diverse and nontraditional ways of representing their understandings of reading comprehension. Accepting and valuing multiple ways of knowing and expressing that knowledge are of paramount importance especially for our increasingly diverse student population. Unlike the majority of traditional assignments where students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; González et al., 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) are not acknowledged or valued in the classroom, this assignment allows students to draw on their background knowledge—like Yvonne's knowledge of sewing, textiles, and storytelling—to create academic connections.

With this article, I do not wish to argue that all of my students experience the type of aesthetic art or the depth of aesthetic response that Dewey and Rosenblatt respectively describe in their work. However, the challenge that students encounter when making, perceiving, and sharing their aesthetic representations enrich their understandings of reading comprehension in ways that traditional types of assignments and assessments would not compare. Indeed, a constant tension with incorporating aesthetic representations into the curriculum is how to judge or assess for completeness. Dewey (1934) articulates both the power and importance of the completeness of the experience, rather than focusing on just the end product: “It is this degree of completeness of living in the experience of making and of perceiving that makes the difference between what is fine or esthetic art and what is not” (p.26).

Based on the findings of this study, several benefits were found in regards to the use of aesthetic representations in the classroom. First, I have found that aesthetic representations promote reflection in a non-competitive manner on both the part of students and educators. Next, the process allows students to demonstrate their ongoing understandings in nontraditional ways which promotes the assessment-as-inquiry paradigm (Serafini, 2001) mentioned previously in the article. Third, aesthetic representations provide a multitude of avenues for students to creatively and uniquely engage their background knowledge, content knowledge, feelings, and experiences. Fourth, this process benefited students not only as artists, but also as audience members. As each aesthetic representation was shared, other students had the opportunity to add to their schemata of reading comprehension and deepen their knowledge of the topic. Additionally, Yvonne reminds us that the culminating experience of the semester allowed students “to see each other in different ways—comical, spiritual, loving, family-oriented, driven, and artistic.” Lastly, having to create their own aesthetic representations challenges the perception that many of our pre-service teachers hold about art being “isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 4).

This article specifically draws attention to the use of aesthetic representations to understand reading comprehension, but I would recommend incorporating aesthetic representations in classrooms of all types and at all levels: elementary, secondary, and university. Although researchers acknowledge “the difficulty of creating a classroom space in which deep aesthetic response is possible” (Calderwood, 2005, p.2), we should strive to make it possible. This alternatively aesthetic environment is necessary in order to expand the spaces of learning and to risk *aesthetic* responses within the *public* nature of classrooms.

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¹ Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) use the term *sign systems* in lieu of aesthetic forms of representation: "By sign systems we mean multiple ways of knowing—the ways in which humans share and make meaning, specifically through music, art, mathematics, drama, and language" (p.160).

² After having to create aesthetic representations in two of my doctoral-level classes with Dr. Lisa Goldstein at the University of Texas at Austin, I decided to adapt the assignment for my own courses. I personally experienced much trepidation, doubt, and ultimate success when Dr. Goldstein forced me out of my linear and literal academic comfort zone.

³ I told students that they must represent their connections to the course through aesthetic means. The assignment constituted a significant percentage of their overall grade: 15%. Students had to email me the following written items: name of student, title of presentation, medium or media (e.g., sculpture, painting, dance, drama, etc.), and a 25 to 40 word description of the representation. Besides emailing me that information, no other written information had to be submitted.

About the Authors

Kimberley Cuero is an assistant professor of literacy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She is particularly interested in how dominant ideologies are woven through and impact literacy instruction, delivery, and expectations for students who fall outside of the ever-shrinking "mainstream." In both her research and teaching, she raises issues regarding the complex sociocultural contexts of literacy, language, and learning.

At the time of the study, the co-researchers were undergraduate students at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Yvonne Vela and Jennifer Bonner now both work in the San Antonio Independent School District, Yvonne as a third grade teacher at Storm Academy and Jennifer as a Kindergarten teacher at Green Elementary. Michelle Schwartz and Rose Touchstone both teach second grade in the North East Independent School District in San Antonio at Windcrest Elementary and East Terrell Hills Elementary, respectively. Brittaney Smith is a first and second grade inclusion teacher at Westwood Terrace Elementary in Northside Independent School District.

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