

# Exploring Relationships between Aesthetic Education and Writing Across the Curriculum Using Poetry

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**Abstract:** Three professors in three different education departments within their college's Division of Education found that combining two different approaches to learning in two university-wide faculty development programs in which they participated, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Lincoln Center Institute's aesthetic education program, not only enhanced each pedagogical approach but also provided an integrated inquiry process that deepened teacher candidates' understanding of the craft and methods of teaching. In this article, they share the benefits of integrating WAC and aesthetic education in their respective courses, by highlighting different vignettes of their classrooms where poetry serves as the vehicle for this integrated inquiry process involving the arts.

## Introduction: Building Community across Disciplines

Teaching at any level can be an isolating experience. Despite the fact that we conduct this enterprise in a roomful of people, we are essentially alone in our work. When we do find opportunities for the cross pollination of ideas, the results can stimulate creativity and enrich our teaching. Some university campuses have begun to recognize the benefits of faculty engaging in collaborative endeavors related to the scholarship of teaching and learning, establishing centers for teaching excellence. For Huber and Hutchings (2005), "[s]uch work has the potential to transform higher education by making the private work of the classroom visible, talked about, studied, built upon, and valued" (p. 25).

University-wide programs developed to encourage faculty to explore new pedagogical approaches offer participants the opportunity to form new partnerships and to learn from colleagues. The colleges within The City University of New York initiated two such comprehensive initiatives: The Writing Across the Curriculum Program (WAC) begun in 1999, and the Lincoln Center Institute's (LCI) Teacher Education Collaborative in aesthetic education, begun in 1996. As LCI uses works in the performing and visual arts as the subjects of inquiry-based learning, and WAC uses writing as a means to promote inquiry, the two are naturally complementary.

Participation is voluntary; it is by chance and affinity that professors often join together in collaboration. We are three such professors, interested in the scholarship of teaching. From three different departments within the Division of Education at Lehman College, CUNY, we independently chose to become involved with both initiatives. As time passed, we each came to several conclusions: (1) there were interesting parallels between the two initiatives, (2) the similarities of these initiatives could enhance our epistemological understanding of teaching and learning, (3) each approach informs, supports, extends, and

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complements the other, (4) both are valid research-based approaches appropriate for teacher education, and (5) a combination of the two perspectives could have a synergistic impact on teaching and learning. Lehman College's WAC program has at its core a commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning, which is an invitation to "treat teaching as a form of inquiry into students' learning, to share results of that inquiry with colleagues, and to critique and build on one another's work" (Huber & Morreale, 2002, p.16). The sharing of knowledge across disciplines allows us to construct new models and conceptual frameworks of teaching and learning and provide the impetus for continued research.

This paper examines the ways in which LCI's approach to aesthetic education shaped our vision of the scholarship of teaching as we became engaged in the WAC program from our respective disciplines of English, literacy and art education. It should be noted at the outset that a main difference between WAC and LCI lies in the constituencies they serve. While WAC is open to professors in all content areas concerned with elevating the level of writing in both graduate and undergraduate courses, the LCI collaborative is mainly concerned with the performing and visual arts and is intended for those in the field of teacher education as well as K-12 partner schools.

The Writing Across the Curriculum program and the Lincoln Center Institute Teacher Education program share many commonalities. The two initiatives are predicated on the process of inquiry, and foster creative expression and the use of the imagination. Multiple perspectives are encouraged and examined. Participants learn to value, depend and build upon prior knowledge to enhance cognitive and creative understanding. Both create a safe space for free experimentation and exploration within clearly established boundaries and sequential progression. Essentially, both approaches allow participants to gain entrée into and learn how to conceptualize a body of knowledge to promote deep understanding from within.

Aesthetic education as it is practiced in the LCI program uses language to help participants build capacity in close observation, what the Institute (Holzer, 2007) terms "Noticing Deeply." "Noticing Deeply" is the first of the nine "Capacities for Imaginative Learning" that provides a foundation for the other Capacities, on which we will elaborate later in this paper. Participants learn how to describe observed phenomena in detail and in depth, making use of this information for creative and critical production. Given the ways in which we had each integrated the practice of "Noticing Deeply" into our work with students, we were struck by the way writing could deepen and enhance the practice of noticing and describing.

## Aesthetic Education and the LCI Teacher Education Collaborative

Our work in aesthetic education at Lehman College is based on our long-term collaboration with The Lincoln Center Institute, the educational arm of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. In existence for over thirty years, LCI is known for its work in the arts with public school teachers and students, as well as with college professors and teacher candidates. Encompassing dance, theater, music, visual art, and architecture, LCI focuses on aesthetic education (understanding and appreciating a work of art) rather than arts education (art historical reference within the context of art production.)

While the direction that aesthetic education takes in different classrooms varies, the general format remains the same. A teaching artist initially meets with the college professor to plan for instructional sessions by brainstorming ideas around a particular work of art. The instructor and teaching artist engage in an inquiry process that stems from the instructor's observations of the work of art. Planning notes include observations, personal connections, contextual information, and main ideas. Gradually and together, the two construct a line of inquiry on which the class activities are built.

For many students in this class there is a tension between the desire to push their own students into "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1995, 2001) and the fear of sacrificing coverage of the required school curriculum. Another, perhaps even more basic fear is of operating outside what we have come to think of as school culture. When students experience a work of literature or art in the traditional classroom, they generally

expect to give an evaluative response based on some formal knowledge. If the students are responding to an art form with which they are not familiar, there is still a tendency for the first response to be "I liked it/I didn't like it." We tell our students before we even encounter a work of art that such responses are not relevant because they close discussions rather than open them. "Before you even think about whether or not you like it," we tell them, "I want you to notice and describe what *it* is." This is accomplished through the process of guiding students to look (or listen) carefully to see beyond surface impressions. As the process goes forward, the teacher will ask students to comment on specifics such as light, color and composition in a work of visual art, or staging in a theatrical performance. While this may put many of them on unfamiliar ground at first, students tend to see very quickly that there is room for a broad range of observations.

The genesis of LCI's pedagogy can be found in the work of philosopher-in-residence Maxine Greene, as well as Dewey (1916, 1997), Vygotsky (1978), and Piaget (1974). Holzer (2007) describes aesthetic education as practiced by Lincoln Center Institute as consisting of "a continuous experience with a work of art over time, mediated by a particular form of individual and group inquiry" (p. 4). This belief, which is central to LCI's approach, is grounded in Greene's (1986, 2001) philosophy of aesthetic education, which values a sustained involvement with works of art through the use of the senses and the imagination. Sustained engagement is seen as essential to fostering deep understanding of works of art and what they have to teach.

Works of art contain so much possibility because they are, by nature, complex and multi-layered. Conceived through a sophisticated interweaving of reasoning, expression, and experience, they offer an inexhaustible treasure of new understandings and perspectives. Just as WAC posits that writing can promote critical thinking in all subject areas to enhance intellectual curiosity, the inclusion of art in an academic classroom similarly promotes exploration and risk-taking, as well as the appreciation of multiple perspectives. Aesthetic education, moreover, typifies the kind of active learning that schools desire to promote. Greene (1994) argues, "If restructuring our schools is intended as a means of releasing the young to pose their own questions and to be empowered to pursue solutions, I cannot but view informed encounters with the arts as anything but paradigmatic" (p.503).

Greiner (2003) argues that aesthetic education encourages teacher educators to move outside of their own isolation to collaborative teaching and learning that allows for personal exploration and social interaction. Involvement in aesthetic education elevates the status of teaching in general because aesthetic education accommodates different learning styles, promotes questioning, risk-taking, language skills, and critical thinking. Csikszentmihali (1997) maintains that there are certain dimensions that can only be developed through involvement with aesthetic education: the sensory, including the perception of beauty; the emotional, the depth and capacity of human feeling and interconnection; the cognitive, thinking and understanding; and what he calls the "transcendent," or the transformation of consciousness (p.4). Greene (2001), Greiner (2003), and Csikszentmihali (1997) agree that the value of aesthetic education lies in its potential to enrich, and even change people's lives.

"The Capacities for Imaginative Learning" is a qualitative assessment instrument that evaluates outcomes of aesthetic understanding (Holzer, 2007). The Capacities include such abilities as the aforementioned "Noticing Deeply" (close observation of structure and detail), as well as "Embodying" (sensory experience), "Questioning" (probing search), "Identifying Patterns" (relationship finding), "Making Connections" (linking of new knowledge and experience to old), "Exhibiting Empathy" (appreciation of different perspectives), "Creating Meaning" (personal interpretations), "Taking Action" (translation of understanding into form and activity), and "Reflecting/Assessing" (formative understanding of learning process). Together these Capacities build capability, aptitude, and competence in use of imagination. While these capabilities necessarily develop over time, it is possible to observe difference of ability within the timeframe of a single college course.

Although the Capacities were initially used to evaluate aesthetic learning, they are also helpful in assessing the integration of art into content areas as well as the qualitative characteristics of learning inherent in other

content areas; literacy, science, math, and history. In fact, Holzer (2007) argues that the Capacities "can be seen as integral to content learning across all curricular subjects... not just learning in the arts" ( p. 6). LCI's approach to aesthetic education allows for learners who may not have prior training in a particular art form to respond to a work of art. Through "Noticing Deeply" and describing, participants in an aesthetic education experience learn to articulate and support their responses to the work of art, thus moving them beyond first impressions. By engaging in these types of experiences, learners do gain a measure of authority through which to have meaningful discussions of the work of art. In a complementary fashion, what we have learned through our WAC training is the crucial role that the act of writing can play in shaping initial observations in such a way that students begin to make meaningful connections between the new and the known. In essence, the process of writing situates students' responses to art in the wider world as the writing itself shapes thought at the point of utterance (Britton, 1970, p.46).

## Writing Across the Curriculum

Our WAC experiences have emphasized the use of writing as a means to learning in and of itself. Fulwiler (1999) argues that writing is a means through which learners can make sense of their experience. "Reading teaches you what you don't already know;" he states, "writing teaches you what to make of what you read and experience" (p. 10). In this stance, writing is a vehicle for inquiry. If it is so, as Fulwiler argues along with Elbow (1973) and Britton (1975), that "writing is not merely an expression of individual thought, but a generative process that creates thought itself" (p. 23), then the inclusion of writing in an aesthetic education inquiry fosters a deeper level of understanding in relation to the work of art they encounter.

The WAC program at Lehman College welcomes faculty in all disciplines with the shared purpose of delving deeply into the ways we use writing in our courses. Participants work in partnership with a "WAC Fellow," who is a doctoral student specifically trained to support faculty in developing writing assignments designed to promote critical thinking. In the yearlong WAC program faculty conduct action research into their use of writing assignments and the impact of those assignments on student learning. This research, a "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers," (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 7) allows faculty to reconsider the role in which they cast writing as a part of their teaching.

In the WAC professional development program at Lehman, professors learn to construct a course syllabus as an intellectual argument, leading to a sustained dialogue with students carried out through a series of informal and formal writing assignments. By constructing our courses around a focused inquiry into our writing practices, we have learned to develop a series of scaffolded writing assignments. Informal writing-to-learn activities, strategies for responding to student work, and the lively use of web-based discussion boards all serve to enhance and deepen student writing.

## Poetry as a Common Thread

Poetry is a genre that is uniquely suited to capturing the essence of an idea or experience as it is expressed in writing. Just as the three of us found commonalities between WAC and aesthetic education, we all discovered that this link was often expressed in the form of poetry. While poetry assignments have the power to support students in synthesizing knowledge, (Young, et al., 2003; Winslow, 2003), it is seldom given serious consideration in WAC programs. Still, according to Young (2003), "Writing poetry about knowledge learned in academic courses creates ways for that knowledge to be in the world and to remake the writer's world based on new information and experience" (p. 6). This is why the three of us, steeped as we are in our WAC and aesthetic education philosophies, have instinctively come to poetry as a way of engaging our students' imaginations in the process of learning pedagogical methods.

The spare language and imagery of poetry can help students to articulate their responses to a work of art in a way that embodies that response, thereby enacting one of the "Capacities for Imaginative Learning"

(Holzer, 2007). "Noticing Deeply" is what poets and artists do in order to create their work. Poetry is a subject that teachers may be required to teach, but seldom experience in teacher education programs (Gulla, 2007). The National Commission on Writing (2003) report states, "Teachers need to understand writing as a complex (and enjoyable) form of learning and discovery, both for themselves and their students" (p. 5). The direct experience of writing poetry in response to art provides teacher candidates with a strategy that they can directly apply in their own classrooms.

As in all of the methods courses we teach, we strive for a balance of theory and practice. Generally what that means is, we'll model a strategy, the students will try it out, and then there will be an accompanying theoretical reading and discussion. When working with students on processing an aesthetic education experience, writing poetry can serve an essential role in making sense of the experience and embodying a response to the work of art that is itself artistic. By responding to a work of art by creating his or her own work of art, a student makes first hand contact with the creative experience. Responding poetically, as opposed to, say, writing a five-paragraph essay in response to a work of art allows for a more visceral, personal experience of writing. Students who may be used to the expectation of performing academic writing tasks tend to do so with the goal of completing the assignment by supplying the right answer to a specific question or topic. Because the notion of right and wrong is irrelevant in poetry there is a freedom to think divergently and contact the true creative self. As Young, et al. (2003) describe the use of poetry across the curriculum in their own courses: "They do the work of poets and thinkers—not just study how others do such work" (p. 42).

## Working across Three Disciplines

Through discussions that took place in an informal study group formed by faculty doing research on their work in aesthetic education, the three of us began to notice similarities in the ways we used poetry assignments as a vehicle for deepening our students' understanding of both the works of art we were exploring in our classes and the ways of seeing and responding to them that we were attempting to foster. The following sections will illustrate the integration of aesthetic education as practiced by LCI and writing-to-learn strategies in the form of poetry assignments. By showcasing examples in the three courses we teach in English education, literacy studies, and art education, we highlight the natural fit between these pedagogies and the implications for teaching and learning in the field of teacher education.

### English Education: Amanda Gulla

Among the classes I teach in the graduate program in English Education is a course called Aesthetic Education. In this course, students learn to challenge their preconceived notions about the place of art in the K-12 curriculum by learning to respond in unexpected ways. By its very nature, a graduate course in aesthetic education tends to throw teacher candidates into disequilibrium. They may not know what aesthetic education means, whether it makes sense for them to be devoting time to looking at visual art, attending dance performances, or listening to music when there are tests to be taken and standards to be met. Engaging with these works of art on a deeply kinesthetic level is at the heart of the experience I undertake to share with my students. I tell them that there is a clear connection between being able to "read" a photograph, a painting, or an actor or dancer's gestures, and being able to read a novel, a poem, or even a tricky essay question on a high-stakes test.

Some students in the Aesthetic Education class have spoken of the transformative effect this work has had in their own classrooms. One student wrote:

One of the most important functions I serve is making the arts accessible to my students. More often than not, they view the arts as an indulgence of the 'rich and white.' Convincing them that the fine arts are for everyone is sometimes a hard sell, which is why their work in aesthetic

education is so critical. Not only do we expose them to the arts, they get to spend time discussing, thinking about, and actually making art. By the end of the experience, a whole new world has been opened to them.

The very way the poetry assignments are given removes students from the comfort zone of academic performative writing. For example, here is a description of a workshop to prepare students for Mary Whalen's (2003) exhibit of staged photographs entitled "[A Night Sonnet So Far](#)." Whalen's photographs, which she describes as whimsical but which many viewers perceive as "eerie" and "other-worldly" are mostly of costumed children in a back yard setting. The images, which are inspired by the poems of Edward Lear, suggest narratives but these are entirely open to interpretation by the viewer. A week before showing the class Whalen's photographs, I asked students to find and bring to class some photographs in which they could discern that "something was going on, but they couldn't be quite sure what it was." Following my deliberately cryptic admonition, I asked them to try to locate in the photographs they had chosen the literary elements of setting, character, and plot. Using adjustable paper frames, I instructed them to frame each element separately, and jot a brief description after each framing. Then I asked them to do a short piece of writing that encompassed the setting, characters, and plot as they had described them.

Afterwards, the class looked at Whalen's sequence of black and white photographs and I instructed students to look for the same literary elements in these pictures. Again, they wrote (this time poems) in response to the photographs. One of the images is of a bare legged girl in a tutu climbing a ladder nailed to a tree. She is ascending to (or possibly descending from) what we can only guess must be a tree house. We see her only from the waist down, so all we can discern of the main subject is the stiff crinoline tutu and her pale bare legs against the rough bark of the tree she climbs. Another of the photographs depicts a small girl standing on a wooden platform crying while an older girl in a tutu (perhaps our tree climber again?) stalks away from her. In the background of this photo, a bush is burning. Here was the poem one student, Kelly, wrote after the framing activity:

### Growing Up

*Life comes flying by me in a tutu  
 Damned witch let me be  
 I have no interest in these breasts you gave me  
 Why won't you let me be?  
 Stop feeding this fire called adolescence  
 I want to stay forever youthful  
 I refuse to leave  
 I'll cry until you take them back  
 Scream from the bottom of my soul  
 I'll stand here until the darkness settles  
 and you won't be able to find me to add on any more  
 You and your cursed tutu*

In this poem, Kelly deliberately conflates the narratives of the two photographs. She draws upon the suggestion of escape in the image of the girl climbing up or down the tree. In the prolonged "Noticing Deeply" exercise, students commented on the vulnerability of the girl's bare legs and feet and suggested that it was a metaphor for the roughness of life during the vulnerable period of adolescence. While this image served as the central emotional theme for her poem, the other photograph described above supplied the outward expressions of the subject's emotions. She draws upon the literal image (*stop feeding this fire...*) and links it to her interpretation (*...of adolescence*). In a sense, she is borrowing the image of the younger

child's outward expression of rage which is so clearly visible (*scream from the bottom of my soul*) to lend a "face" to our tutu-clad tree climber (*I want to stay forever youthful*).

Writing this poem was more than a way of describing what was happening in the picture. Through deep engagement with the image, Kelly was able to use poetry as a vehicle for making sense of what was happening in these photographs. Because we did not evaluate or interpret the pictures during the guided noticing activity which took approximately 45 minutes, each student had a rich store house of observations with which to build his or her own interpretation. Kelly's poem suggests an attempt to make sense of what was happening in her ninth grade students' lives by recalling the turmoil of adolescent girlhood. In her reflection on this assignment she wrote: "I have found my poetic voice."

Asking students to write in response to photographs is an activity that is used fairly often to prepare high school students for document-based questions on standardized exams. This writing, however, served a different purpose. Instead of asking them to demonstrate their literal understanding of what is going on in the photograph, the writing in response to the literary elements identified in the pictures asks students to describe, articulate, and to make sense of what is seen by making art in a different form that expresses some essential core of what the artist is saying to us. Through writing, learners articulate the choices the artist made with her photographs, as we might also do in relation to paintings, dance, and works in theater, music, film, or of course, literature. One student said in her reflection on the activity: "I think that if I were asked to write about a picture, the work would be very superficial. Taking the time to observe and notice a work of art gives me more to think about and hopefully more to write about."

Thus the "Noticing Deeply" and describing lend themselves to richer writing, while the act of writing pushes students' thinking further than describing alone. It is not writing in general, however, that takes students to this new place of discovery. It is specifically poetry in which the writer creates a new reality woven from the fabric of responses to the original impetus. If Kelly had written a critical essay about each of the two Whalen photographs she incorporated into her responses, she would not have had the freedom to create the narrative line she did in her poem. As Winslow (2003) says, "...poetry offers learners a way to imagine (and to image) through sudden global insight, and to organize their experience..." (p. 45).

Writing as it is usually practiced in the aesthetic education inquiry workshop includes the teaching artist capturing participants' observations in "wall notes." These notes often become a reference point as the inquiry proceeds. When the aesthetic inquiry takes place in a writing-intensive or writing-enhanced[2] course, the writing itself tends to take on another dimension. The thinking that is an outgrowth of writing becomes an integral part of the inquiry process. Writing can be the art making experience that is a part of the prolonged encounter with a work of art, or it can be the tool that is used to reflect on that encounter.

In some instances, the act of writing poetry provides learners an entrance to an idea or a text that might otherwise be inaccessible to them. This is true not only in a cognitive sense, as with the photography example cited earlier, but in the sense that writing can offer students an opportunity to place themselves in a character's shoes. In the class *Literature-Based Literacy Programs in Early Childhood, Elementary Education and Adolescents Education*, the literacy professor (Pinhasi-Vittorio) developed a virtual mirror image of the process described in the English Education course. This occurred using several of the "Capacities of Imaginative Learning" (Holzer, 2007), such as "Noticing Deeply" and "Making Connections," to write poetry and to help her students focus on character development and the development of empathy in the novels they read in class.

## Literacy Studies: Limor Pinhasi-Vittorio

*Literature-Based Literacy Programs in Childhood and Adolescent Education* is a graduate course which uses various children's and young adult texts as a way to infuse literacy into the K-12 curriculum. The class

meets every fortnight allowing a longer time for each session. The design of the class has evolved throughout the years with aesthetic education and the application of Writing Across the Curriculum becoming central aspects of my pedagogy. In this class, in addition to discussing the various children's and young adult books and professional texts, the students are also focused on the aspect of art making as an additional way of transacting with a text (Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995) to provide another way of thinking about and understanding literature.

Part of my philosophy that impacts the development of the course is my view of the text/poem as a work of art. As such, at the end of each session the students are immersed in art making activities whereby they need to recreate different aspects of the text, such as character development, point of view, tone, etc. For instance, when we discussed character development, the students were to create children's books focusing on one character in the book. One group of students responding to the book *Sloppy Firsts* (McCafferty, 2001) chose to write a picture book from the point of view of a less visible character. Each page in their picture book was written as a poem, and thus they created multiple poems as a representation of one book.

In a sequenced class when we continued our exploration of character development, I wanted the students to be able to connect with the main character on a more intimate level. For that week, the students were assigned to read three books; one of the books that we focused was *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake (1998). In this book, Flake portrays the story of the protagonist, Maleeka, who is verbally abused by other students of color in her school about her dark skin. The book raises issues about self-image, validation, and concepts of beauty (Massa & Pinhasi-Vittorio, in press).

Through the process of "Noticing Deeply," the students were asked individually and thereafter in groups of three to identify descriptions in the novel that indicate different characters' views of Maleeka as well as Maleeka's view of herself. While the students were able to articulate many details in the book and identify Maleeka's growth throughout the book, they had some reservations about whether all students could relate to her inner struggle. Although the book transcends the issue of race, the students could not see beyond the racial experience. I wanted them to see the complexity of the experience of being an outsider.

Building upon the numerous details in the book, I asked the students to write a poem about the skin **they** are in, guiding them to focus on themselves and their inner struggle whatever it may be. A particularly interesting example of inner struggle was a poem by Erica:

### **The Skin I'm In**

*Wish my skin was patchwork colors like Elmer<sup>[3]</sup>  
 One tone does not reveal all the layers  
 Smile on the face is the top layer, but dig deeper there is so much more  
 Like flies in a bunch thoughts  
 Weave -in and out buzzing all day long and won't get out  
 inner monologue shoos them out  
 The search for perfection  
 Such high expectations  
 Why set up to fail?  
 Spots light burn too bright  
 Go with the crowd masking silence with laughter  
 Laughing until I smile  
 Contentment with in REACH*

In her poem Erica is able to capture her struggle for perfection. She uses her prior knowledge referencing a children's book to describe the complexity and the intricacy of her feelings. She uses descriptive language to portray her inner struggle as her "inner monologue shoos" her negative thoughts away. The images for



negative thoughts are represented by flies, which keep on intruding and coming back. Is it like Maleeka's thought when she feels the heaviness of her skin? When Erica read her poem in class, the students were able to "Notice Deeply" and to make the connection between Erica's inner struggle and Maleeka's. Although in this poem there was no discussion of race, the students were able to make a connection between what they noticed in the poem and their own prior knowledge as well as Maleeka's experience.

Like Erica, Penny was also able to reveal her daily struggle and conflict as she asks,

*Am I pretty to you?  
Am I the right size?  
Don't look at my chest,  
Please look at my eyes!  
They are blue in case you care,  
I feel uncomfortable when you stare.  
These high heels I wear make me so tall  
I'm such a clutz, I'm going to fall.  
I look in the mirror and what do I see  
A woman, a teacher, just plain ole me.  
The mirror is nice today we will see how long it lasts...*

As Penny read her poem, several students in the class commented that they heard their own voices along with hers. Our writings brought the class back to the novel, and the students were able to see that in each of us there is "a little Maleeka" who is struggling to find herself. The students' poems allowed them to make a closer connection with the novel and the character and, taking a critical stance, questioned the concept of beauty and the way society equates beauty with worth. The discussion following the poetry was rich in content and allowed the students to envision how they as literacy specialists would introduce Maleeka's experience into their literacy classes. Using "Noticing Deeply" to describe Maleeka's experience pushed the students to further their understanding of the character. Through their own poetry writing, the students were able to make connections and develop empathy and critical thinking.

In addition to the in-class activity, every semester the students are also exposed to works of art. The class attends a musical, theatrical, or dance performance at Lincoln Center Institute. Upon going to Lincoln Center and observing a theatrical performance of *Woza Albert* (Mtwana, et.al., 1979), a play which takes place in apartheid South Africa and offers the idea of what would have happened if Jesus had been there; the students were asked to respond to the work of art in written form. One of the students wrote that "the subject matter was dark, oppressive...it was told through music and dance, which made me feel more in-tune with the plight and issues of the people of South Africa..." As the student continued her response, she wrote: "I also was really touched by the scene in which the two men were competing over the street in which they sought to be hired." She connected this scene to one that is familiar to many Americans: "Is this similar to what it's like being a day laborer, waiting in a lot somewhere?"

Hence writing is one of the most important tools students can use to engage in analytical thinking beyond the work of art. All writings, as varied as they were, exemplified the use of imagination and a deeper sense of reflection, stretching beyond the work of art itself.

## Art Education: Andrea Zakin

The graduate elementary art education course I teach, *Children's Concepts of Art: 1st through 6th Grade*, is designed to acquaint students with basic art skills and approaches so they can incorporate art into their curriculum, and at the same time, expand their understanding of art education as a field of study as well as the nature of art and its place in children's development. In traditional art educational perspectives,

responding to art experiences occurs in conjunction with drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, and printmaking activities, but in LCI's approach to aesthetic education, the work of art takes center stage. In this approach, students are prepared to view a work of art by breaking down and translating aspects of the artwork into language, movement, or visual art exercises. Additional activities may follow engagement with the work of art. Even with their differing emphases, I have discovered aesthetic education to be a natural fit with art education, although I do tend to incorporate it midway into the course once they've had some art making experiences.

Due to a lack of exposure, students enter the class with trepidation and fear of art, and, when they hear about aesthetic education, a fear of that as well. Even in an art class, aesthetic education is a mysterious quantity. Long before my participation in WAC, I held the belief that art and writing are interconnected and synergistic. I routinely engage my students in art projects that require writing in order to be complete. Students are initially surprised by the emphasis on writing as well as the inclusion of other art forms (particularly performance based artwork) in a course that is supposed to center on visual art. Students come to understand that while art education is indeed the focus of the class, the mechanics of the LCI approach to aesthetic education are the same whether the visual or the performing arts are involved.

In an art education course, it is also important to awaken the capacity to closely observe objects, works of art, the surrounding environment, as well as the child artists students encounter in their fieldwork experience. This is a capacity that I believe is enhanced by the inclusion of poetry writing within the context of aesthetic education. I have found that aesthetic education provides multiple avenues into a work of art and that poetry writing enhances students' understanding of art. In the activities described here, students engaged in a series of exercises that used writing to enhance the aesthetic education experience.

In class, students responded to a reproduction of David Hockney's (1988) "Large Interior, Los Angeles," and subsequently to a dramatic performance of "The Snow Queen," (an adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale) at Lincoln Center Institute. They took turns sharing their observations, first orally and then in writing, noting the details on large post-it papers, which they transposed into different kinds of writing, including poetry. The Hockney painting depicts an immense, sunny, modern Los Angeles living room populated by an assortment of chairs. Students selected a particular chair and wrote a poem from that chair's perspective. Jenny compiled a list of words about her chair: unyielding, hard, straight backed, at attention, bristly, straight laced, old fashioned to compose a line of her poem: *My darkly maroon, bristly, stiff, unyielding presence makes visitors sit straight upright and at attention.* Sean, who identified with the chaise lounge, constantly referred back to his listing of descriptive words and phrases, changing and including what he needed to complete his poem:

### **I Recline and So Do You**

*I am comfortable, pleasantly plump, and inviting  
A warm shade of pink with a long, rounded seat, and gently, curving back  
I am stuffed and a little oversized  
I choose who sits on me by how I make them feel  
Only the deserving appreciate my  
Soft, velvety surface that  
Envelopes, billows, and then sighs with your weight  
I recline and so do you*

Sean began his poem by describing himself as the chaise longue, borrowing words from his list to facilitate the writing process. In the language of the Capacities, Sean was able to closely observe or "Notice Deeply," and fueled by the descriptive words he had generated, to identify with the chair or to exhibit "Embodying," a Capacity that displays sensory receptivity. He then moved beyond description to adopt two additional

perspectives (chair and visitor) through his claim that his chair (and its attributes) self-selected visitors because it affected how visitors experienced him and how he (as the chair) made them feel. Forming affective connection and relationship with the chair and its visitors ("Making Connections" and "Identifying Patterns" through relationship are additional Capacities) also shows a burgeoning capability for empathy and meaning making. ("Exhibiting Empathy" and "Creating Meaning" are sophisticated levels of the Capacities.) It took poetry writing (demonstrating the Capacity, "Taking Action") to give form to feelings and ideas, which then provided opportunity for Reflection (the final Capacity).

It was clear to students that extensive engagement with a work of art, particularly observing and notating their descriptions of the artwork provided them with a wealth of language to draw upon to create their poems. They understood that the poetry was driven by description and that it took observation to pry apart the layers of the work of art to create in-depth understanding; a common goal of aesthetic education and art education. Projection into the artwork enabled Sean to understand the Hockney painting from the inside out, and to identify with different perspectives. Sean said that he knew what it felt like to be in that living room, to be that chair. In effect, identifying with the chair gave him entrée into the painting. Now, when he looks at that painting, and perhaps any other painting, he will have a better understanding of the choices that went into making the artwork. Sean shared, "I don't see that painting as something different from what I know." In other words, the artwork no longer remained outside his sphere of experience, knowledge, and understanding.

While writing poetry in response to an artwork may not be unusual, the amount of preparation beforehand probably is. Here, students worked together to produce an extensive repertory of descriptive imagery to enhance writing capacity. I have found that preliminary activities that enhance sensory perception and conceptual understanding (the kind that LCI proposes) significantly increase students' ability to explore, discover, and decipher an artwork, further deepened by forming and notating thoughts in writing (as WAC advocates). It was the emphasis on observation and description, coupled with the investigative nature of the writing process, that created the richly layered reflection, not just the satisfying visual and written results.

Students transferred their newfound observational abilities from visual art to drama in preparation for attending a performance of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen." They analyzed the fairytale genre by isolating key elements and themes, and armed with small notebooks, jotted what they noticed about the play, identifying themes of interest. The notebooks served as a place to grab hold of and form thoughts, essentially using writing to think. Employing the same format used to describe the Hockney painting, students generated a descriptive listing of the play's attributes, and then selected a particular theme as the focus of their own fairytale story, represented in written and visual form. Student lists included observations of actors (darting, stately, domineering, menacing), scenery (sparse, minimal, essential), props (out of scale, graphic, regal), movement (jagged, languid, fluid, quick paced), and narrator (omnipotent, Wizard of Oz-like, maternal, eventempered). Students identified a variety of themes such as the triumph of friendship, childhood innocence, the power of love, life quest, and courage, and selected one of the themes as the motivation for their stories.

Students appropriated descriptions generated by the play for their own fairytales. Trevor said that characteristics of his central character derived from one of the lead actors in the "Snow Queen." Shelley borrowed the idea of travel from temperate to cold climate, and Jose transposed the concept of close connection within friendship to romantic love. Natalie shared, "If we hadn't done all that description of the play together, there wouldn't have been so much to write about. If we hadn't written so much, we wouldn't have understood the painting or the performance so well. I felt like I really knew what I was talking about, which is not something I've felt before. When it came to making my own artwork, it came easily to me." Natalie's fairytale told the story of twins, representing good and evil, whose temperaments ultimately balanced out as they became more alike.

Moving from painting to performance helped students see that the process of noticing and describing can be applied to any art form, and that while the specifics may differ, the method is the same. They also learned that responding to art can occur on any level: the work of established artists, their own artwork, and that created by children, and that response to art stimulates the creation of art. In addition, students understood that writing not only captured but also generated thought, and that it additionally helped them enter into the work of art. These examples illustrate that incorporating poetry writing activities in combination with aesthetic education experiences enhance the practice of both. Writing stimulated by making and responding to art is similarly rich, complex, and generative of new ideas that enhance personal connection.

## Conclusion

Aesthetic education is essentially about understanding the created world by describing the choices made in producing works of art. Engaging students' imaginations using writing requires students to plumb their own depths in order to respond to the work of art in kind. Assignments such as those described in our three classes represent transformative events for our students, experiences that would not have happened without the integration of aesthetic education and WAC.

The role of writing in the aesthetic education classroom is traditionally one of documentation of discussions surrounding the work of art. When writing as an act of cognition is integrated into the process of describing the work of art, students can use this writing to synthesize their observations. This belief in the power of writing to generate critical thinking has the potential to place writing firmly at the center of an aesthetic education curriculum. In fact, the result of writing poetry in response to art tends to move beyond synthesis to embodiment as students create their own works of art. In responding poetically to a theme in an artwork, we ask the students to make this theme their own and use it to forge a new work of art, synthesizing cognitive understanding with the imagination.

It is the engagement of the imagination that sets poetry assignments apart from writing which serves to communicate understanding, or even from other writing-to-learn assignments. As Winslow (2003) says, "Because poetry remakes reality, it cannot be a mere tool of communication" (p. 47). It is this process of remaking reality that empowers students and lends them a visceral understanding of the power of imaginative learning. Once students have had the experience of entering the world of a work of art through the portal of their imaginations they can begin to see the possibilities for their own students. As one student who is a high school English teacher said in his reflection on writing poems in response to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things they Carried*, "This is the kind of work that keeps me human in my classroom. It helps me to reach out to my own students' humanity and lets them see that learning is not just something you do for a test." Preliminary findings in research that is currently underway support the conclusion that teachers who have learned to use a writing intensive approach to aesthetic education in teacher education programs are continuing to utilize these strategies in their own classrooms (Gulla & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009, work in progress).

As we have discussed this synergy of approaches among ourselves it continues to impact and shape our teaching as well as our research in the scholarship of teaching. In fact, the collaboration among the three of us has led each of us to create a new kind of syllabus that embraces the integration of WAC and aesthetic education. Coming from different disciplines in teacher education, we all hold different epistemological paradigms. Despite our differences, our teaching centers on this integrated inquiry process in ways that improves student engagement and learning. The synthesis of WAC and aesthetic education creates a unique pedagogy that we believe is greater than the sum of its parts. As a result of our ongoing conversations, our syllabi continually evolve to reflect what we learn from our students and each other. Through our engagement with aesthetic education and Writing Across the Curriculum, teaching remains a lively art with almost limitless possibilities.

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## Notes

- [1] Authors' names appear in alphabetical order.
- [2] These are terms used in Lehman College's and other WAC programs to refer to courses taught by faculty who have participated in the WAC professional development.
- [3] Elmer the patchwork elephant is a picture book by David Mckee. Elmer has a colorful body with yellow, orange, red, pink, blue, green, black and white arranged as a patchwork. He is cheerful and optimistic.

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