

# Training of the Aesthetic Being: Connecting Sri Aurobindo's Ideas of the Visual in Education Across Cultures

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## Abstract

This paper grows out of the collaboration between an English Educator and an Art Educator who both work with pre service and in-service teachers as they prepare for teacher licensure. Through ongoing conversations about shared interests, the collaboration now has connected the East and West. More specifically, this paper connects Sri Aurobindo's ideas about education and self-education, ones that privilege the visual and aesthetic, to theories and practices in US Education. Aesthetic Education is at the center of this work. We believe that engaging with artwork, artifacts, and visual culture, provides learners with opportunities to explore the unfamiliar as a way to understand the familiar, enhancing a greater worldview. Ideas from theorists in the West, such as John Dewey and Maxine Greene, along with strategies for visual analysis based on Feldman and Yenawine, align with and are enhanced by Sri Aurobindo's ideas about education. Through the about power of Intercultural Education, the interconnections and connections begin to knit together East and West, opening a broader worldview in the service of improving education.

*Key words* : Sri Aurobindo, Visual Analysis, Aesthetic Education, Art Education, Intercultural Education, Contemplative Practice and Intersubjectivity

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We do not want brilliant students, we want living souls. -The Mother (Pavitra, 2006, p. 150)

## Beginnings of our Interdisciplinary Collaboration

As the Conference Chair for the 2016 Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL) conference, I began to look for ways to engage colleagues inside and outside of my discipline. I wanted to find out how Kristi's work might intersect and enhance the offerings at the AEPL Conference. We are both teacher educators; Kristi is an art educator, and Maureen is an English educator. As teacher educators, we share interests in broadening our notions and practices in teaching and learning. Through our ongoing conversations, we have looked for ways to work together and build on our shared interests.

In early spring 2016, just such a collaborative opportunity came about. The AEPL conference itself was entitled, "Deep Reading: Reinventing Identity through Imagination." It was the annual conference for the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL) and was supported by and hosted by our university- the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth from June 23-25, 2016. AEPL is official assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and is open to all those interested in exploring the boundaries of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies. (From the AEPL website—aepl.org): "Areas of interest include, but are not limited to: aesthetic, emotional, and moral intelligence; archetypes; body wisdom; care in education; creativity; felt sense theory; healing; holistic learning; humanistic and transpersonal psychology; imaging; intuition;

kinesthetic knowledge; meditation; narration as knowledge; reflective teaching; silence; spirituality; and visualization.”

Our ongoing conversations centered on the importance of the visual in all learning, and we began to brainstorm ways to bring the visual to the forefront. Kristi talked about how she had been doing some work with various techniques for analyzing artwork. Through our ongoing conversations, it was decided that Kristi would create workshop in response to the themes of the conference and the tenets of the AEPL Organization. Her work with visual analysis and literacy aligned with the conference’s call for a transformative education where reading, identity, and imagination were at the center. More specifically, Kristi’s art education work with literacy through analysis privileged the visual and the aesthetic and also connected with deep reading and deep learning, broadening the notion of learning itself.

### **The Importance of Intercultural Education**

Our work, in broad strokes, highlights intersubjectivity, which refers to shared relations and discussions between people. Our work together also creates community and helps us to uncover rich intersections between our teaching and research in art education and English education. In Hall’s collaborative work with neuroscientist Professor Aminda O’Hare, the intersubjective sense was made by “identifying and using tools and concepts in psychology and trying them out in education and vice-versa” (Hall & O’Hare, 2014, p.1). In this collaboration as teacher educators in English and art, the visual and the language have interplay. We find common ground in literacy and in multimodality.

The themes of our paper draw directly from and contribute to the notion of intercultural education. Although there are many international organizations that promote understanding across

cultures, perhaps one of the most important ones is the Fulbright Organization.

In 1946, J. William Fulbright, a United States senator founded the Fulbright Organization, which manifested a vision for intercultural education. Since, the beginning of the program, it is estimated that more than 370,000 people have been awarded Fulbright scholarships around the world. In his speeches and in his writings about intercultural education, J. William Fulbright shared his understanding of its value:

The essence of intercultural education is the acquisition of empathy—the ability to see the world as others see it, and to allow for the possibility that others may see something we have failed to see, or may see it more accurately. (<https://eca.state.gov/impact>).

We share J. William Fulbright’s vision for intercultural education, and, in this paper our goal is to bring to light theories and practices that highlight Sri Aurobindo’s contributions to the visual in learning through an intercultural lens connecting India and the United States. More specifically, we pair together relevant theories and practices from Sri Aurobindo with art education techniques for analyzing/ reading artwork to foster deep understanding of ourselves and mutual understanding around the world.

### **Sri Aurobindo’s Aesthetic Being and the underpinnings of Aesthetic Education**

There is a timelessness to Sri Aurobindo’s ideas on art, aesthetics, and education have had a lasting impact as these philosophies have been and continue to be applied and embraced by those working in various fields. His holistic vision had strong underpinnings in his philosophy of the aesthetic being which explored the education of the whole being, one that embraced mind, body, and spirit. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) positioned himself in a “pan-Indian context” over the course of his life as he engaged with both Eastern and Western ideas. As Murali reminds us that at

“almost every point in his life was an “integrative” eye that sought a holistic vision, and to that end his works are attempts toward a *unifying awareness*—an ultimate *communion and transformation in poetic terms*, which constituted his *Indian legacy*” (p.146). His beliefs and understanding of the aesthetic in education was advanced. Sri Aurobindo believed that early in every learner’s experiences in education there should include knowledge of the senses, along with a learner should explore “the cultivation of discrimination and the aesthetic sense, the capacity to choose and take up what is beautiful and harmonious, simple, healthy and pure” (Pavitra, 2006, p.60). Similarly, the movement to utilize contemplative practices in the US and other parts of the world, also privilege a holistic view on education and educational practices. Waxler and Hall (2011) describe it this way:

Teachers who utilize contemplative practices connect with their students as whole persons, reaching their students on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Such teaching can be pictured as an organic process...We see such teaching as an embodied process, an adventurous journey (p.141).

The cultivation of attention is needed for aesthetic education as well as contemplative education, and there are many intersections between these models and theories of education. The learning process itself also underlines reflective practice and the ability to be reflective. From the teaching perspective, Hall and Archibald (2008) posit, “When we [teachers] focus within our classrooms on contemplative practices, we attempt to develop a teaching and learning space that allows sustained reflection and focused mindfulness in the learning process” (p.2). This also exemplifies Sri Aurobindo’s notions of reflection in teaching and learning, as Hall (2012) points out:

here is where Aurobindo’s second principle becomes very important... As teachers, we must help students find constructive ways to

consult their own mind in the service of learning. And, as Aurobindo reminds us, this consultation with the mind must be done in accordance with ones ‘own nature’ (p.1).

Aesthetic education, as a complex concept, cannot be defined simply. Often, it draws upon the various areas highlighted above including self-awareness, reflection, contemplative practice and observation.

In the United States, aesthetic education is embedded within art education, so much so, that both the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks and the National Core Arts Standards for Visual Art reflect aesthetic ideals. Building upon the ideas of both Sri Aurobindo and John Dewey (1934), Maxine Greene (2001) describes aesthetic education as

an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful" (p.6).

Greene (2001) continues to describe aesthetic encounters as situated encounters where the perceivers of a work of art understand the piece calling upon their own cultural capital which takes into consideration their backgrounds, biographies, and personal experiences. Greene (2001) suggests that we presume a multiplicity of perspectives, a plurality of interpretations respecting that we all bring our own context, knowledge, and experiences to each piece we consider.

Sri Aurobindo’s ideas of educating the senses to develop greater understanding of the world is echoed in the 1977 statement of its values entitled *What We Believe and Why*, issued by the National Art Education Association (NAEA). This document included compelling reasons to champion art education, NAEA believes that in addition to helping students understand and appreciate art, the role of art education provides

aesthetic experience and human understanding while developing creative and flexible forms of thinking (NAEA, 2016). Additionally, the popular studio habits of mind coined by Hetland and Winner (2007), believe that in art education helps students to observe, envision, innovate, and reflect as the basic features of education that are applicable to all (Hetland *et al.*, 2007; NAEA, 2016).

Sri Aurobindo's ideas closely align with contemporary art education pedagogy as we utilize Constructivism to facilitate the gathering of old knowledge as way to find new knowledge, and to then utilize and apply this new knowledge to various situations (Pavitra, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). We suggest that one method for applying this theory to practice is to lead students through visual analysis of artwork. David Perkins, Senior Co-Director of Harvard's Project Zero notes that the practice of looking at art requires thoughtful attention to what the artworks have to show and say. The works of art connect to viewers' personal and social lives. Thus, looking at art "provides an excellent setting for better thinking, for the cultivation of what might be called the art of intelligence" (NAEA, 2016) requiring the viewer to look both inward and outward to gain full realization of the work (NAEA, 2016).

### **Bringing Sri Aurobindo's philosophy into 21<sup>st</sup> Century Art Education Practice**

It has been said that "Sri Aurobindo lived with his spiritual and aesthetic quests as we live with our everyday realities" (Murali, 2007-8, p.149). In a world saturated with visual information, art educators are feeling pressured to provide meaningful experiences for students that address much more than creating beautiful paintings. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) advocate for authentic learning experiences:

Theorists describe authentic instruction as meaningful learning that connects to the real world beyond the classroom, and authentic

assessment as evaluating students' learning in ways that respect the qualities of the specific learning experience, rather than through standardized indicators. Research suggests that authentic instruction and assessment improve learning in all social and economic groups, in various course structures, and with various contents (p.25).

Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) suggest that themes from teaching art should be taken first from personal experience and incorporate contemporary art and culture. Sri Aurobindo encourages teachers to begin with what is familiar as a way to gain knowledge about the unfamiliar (Pavitra, 2006). Thus, using visual culture as it relates to sources most accessible to students may be the most compelling. Themes that are useful address fundamental human conditions such as love, death, war, fear, status, work, and community. In Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, this type of authentic educational experience enhances both mental and spiritual health, given that the understanding of aesthetics will help not only the child's character but enhance the appreciation of art, love beauty, healthy and noble things in both nature and of human creation (Pavitra, 2006).

### **Beginning with the familiar: Visual Culture Studies**

Visual culture has made its way to the forefront of many discussions in the art education community. By definition, visual culture includes a combination of cultural studies, art history, critical theory, philosophy, and anthropology, by focusing on aspects of culture that rely on visual images (Freedman, 2003). Visual artifacts and performances of all kinds as well as new and emerging technologies, inside and outside the art museum, and the beliefs, values, and attitudes imbued in those artifacts and performances by the people who make, present, and use them. Failing to accept visual culture studies as a necessary concept in contemporary art education is truly

doing a disservice to our students, who frequently experience it. Sri Aurobindo's beliefs support visual culture studies as he advocated for finding beauty where one might least expect it (Gall, 2008), and believed that in order to understand beauty in its truest and widest sense, we must not exclude any aspects of life when seeking object of beauty and meaning (Ghose, 1971). A leading researcher in Art Education, Paul Duncum (2003) states:

...although images are everywhere today, there is a serious gap between seeing imagery and reflecting upon what we see, let alone understanding the institutions that produce the imagery we see. Because of this gap, there exists an urgent need for an education that deals directly with the images that constitute the world of our students (p.20).

Gall (2008) suggests that we utilize our critical skills as a method for understanding culture and the ways it is shaped by visual production and consumption. Everyone views art with their own cultural capital, varying the abilities to decode and analyze the image. In the US, marginalized populations omitted from exhibition in the past have recently been embraced by the museums and galleries in most major cities. With the accessibility of technology, students have access to digital sources and as a result have the opportunity to explore artwork being created all over the world. This increases the cultural capital of many students, and provides access to cultural artifacts that would otherwise be unavailable. Sri Aurobindo's writing suggest that "identity, ethical and aesthetic relativity, self-determination and human purpose were at the very least the cultural capital on which a free India should build, and at best were universal, important and insightful, and hence relevant to all societies" (Gall, 2008, p.210).

### **Understanding the Aesthetic through Analysis**

In order to foster deep understanding of a work of art or familiar visual culture, art educators have long looked to facilitate meaningful encounters with such works. A variety of techniques for visual analysis aimed at increasing visual literacy have been created, the most widely used of these techniques include Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), Aesthetic Education Strategies and those based on the work of E.B. Feldman (Yenawine, 2014; Chin, 2017; Feldman, 1992). Though each of these methods has a unique structure, they are all rooted in constructivism in that the participants are active in the learning process and that they utilize prior knowledge to "engender relevance and a sense of how these new/ modified understandings fit into their own lives and contribute to their understandings of the world around them" (Chin, 2017, p.63). In analyzing the similarities of VTS and Aesthetic Education Strategies, Chin (2017) agrees that both encourage viewers to spend time deeply contemplating the artwork by holding our attention on the work in silence before engaging in dialogue about what has been observed. Each strategy aids the viewer in meaning making through actively engaging, looking within themselves and utilizing their imagination in context to create connections between their personal histories and the clues present in the works (Chin, 2017). This is consistent with Gall's (2008) interpretation of Sri Aurobindo in describing the aim for education to "bring out all that is within the person, to assist the individual to discover him/her self and relationship to the world" (p.214). In these methods of analysis, the role of the teacher as a facilitator or guide rather than an instructor is also consistent with Sri Aurobindo's pedagogical suggestions as

he focuses on asking the teacher to help the student find their inner guidance and assist as a mentor through the exchange of thoughts and experiences (Gall, 2008; Yenawine, 2014). Sri Aurobindo stresses that the mind should be consulted on its own growth as the teacher works with the familiar as a path to understand the unfamiliar (Gall, 2008). The role of the teacher as facilitator is integral to any method of analysis as they are asked to:

prompt the discussion with relevant questions; listen carefully to responses; and acknowledge each student's response(s) respectfully and with neutrality by pointing to what a student is referring to in an artwork, paraphrasing back each response to further clarify understandings and integrate key vocabulary, and linking related thoughts across responses to emphasize evolving understandings (Chin, 2017, p.63).

Through this collaborative dialogue, students are experiencing their own ways of knowing combined with the ideas and views of others while drawing upon all experiences to construct meaning and deeper understanding. In this way, Sri Aurobindo believes that the way toward divine knowledge, included working from the lowest value of art toward the highest. For Sri Aurobindo, the lowest value is purely aesthetic, which helps to refine our essential and emotional nature. Next comes the intellectual and educational value which aims to make the mind flexible and subtle before moving on to the most important value, art's importance to spiritual development (Gall, 2010). Although spiritual development may not be the primary goal for art education, this progression is comparable to the steps taken when analyzing an artwork, as such, scholars believe that "engagement with artworks is especially relevant for exploring reflective and existential, if not spiritual, questions"(Roepagel, 2015, p.41). Through inquiry aimed at increasing visual literacy, the communication of emotion in art demands closer scrutiny, "dhvani or the infinite

reverberation of suggested meaning became an indispensable tool for critical analysis" (Murali, 2007-8, p.150).

As a tool to assist in analysis, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an inquiry technique whereby the educator takes the role of facilitator by choosing an appropriate image or artifact that links to your specific curricular goals (Yenawine, 2003). Then, allow a few moments for students to silently study the image before beginning a group discussion (Yenawine, 2014). The facilitator then poses the following questions:

1. What's going on/ happening in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can you/we find? (Yenawine, 2014, p.25).

The teacher continues by listening to the students, pointing out pertinent points, paraphrases student comments, links related comments and content, builds on ideas, remains neutral and responds to each comment encouraging everyone to share, and thanking students for their collective participation (Yenawine, 2014). The questions can be modified to fit any subject area and teachers are encouraged to use follow-up questions to guide student knowledge toward the goals and objectives of the curricular unit.

To prepare teacher candidates enrolled in the art education program at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, further prompts were utilized to conduct a formal visual analysis rooted in the work of E.B. Feldman (Feldman, 1970) while drawing upon Socratic questioning. Similar to the Aesthetic Education and VTS discussions, this process is designed to move up the rungs of Blooms Taxonomy to engage students in higher order thinking (Chin, 2017). The process begins by asking students to *describe* what they see. At this step of the process, it is important to refocus student responses and attention to what they can observe before moving to the next step in the process, most of the time, the conversation naturally flows from step to step based on

responses and educator prompts. Next, students are asked to *analyze* the formal elements by identifying how the elements and principles of design are used to organize the work and how the materials and techniques are used to create the work. This leads into the *interpretation* phase where students are asked to decipher what the artist is trying to communicate based on the information they have gathered in previous steps. *Context* is then used to support the interpretations by providing any information about the artist, time period, historical movement, or any pertinent information that might assist the students in reading the subtle clues embedded within the piece. Finally, students are asked to *judge* if the work is successful in communicating the artists' intent, if it has value and to support or debate their views. To Sri Aurobindo, the "Rasa, as a conceptual aesthetic incorporates the three nodes of the aesthetic act—the creator (in terms of the work), the text (the nexus or the intersection), and the reader, or the producer of meaning" (Murali, 2007-8, p.150) by carefully considering the intent through contemplating and analyzing the works in this way, students are able to consider Sri Aurobindo's creator, reader and producer to gain a fuller sense of the world as the theories are grounded in the origin and source of the work (Murali, 2007). To Sri Aurobindo, artistic quality must be considered whether we are looking at traditional fine arts, or products of culture that are made or consumed (Gall, 2008). Methods of analysis help us to enact Sri Aurobindo's notion that "reason and intellect are insufficient to the task of carrying us beyond conventional formulae of ethics or aesthetics, beauty or goodness. The discriminating faculty required is intuition" (Gall, 2008, p.213) which is applied to this process as we ask students to make interpretations of the works. In agreement, Maxine Greene (1982) encourages teachers to foster students' skills in imagination so that new languages can be learned and new perspectives explored. She stresses the importance

of enabling students to look beyond what they know, what is perceived as actual and be open to investigating alternative worlds thereby opening up possibilities for deep learning, increased agency, and discovering new territories (Dubin & Prins, 2011). In this way, analysis and contemplation help us to explore not only the formal aesthetic beauty, "but also moral, intellectual and spiritual beauty" encountered in all aspects of our lives (Gall, 2008, p.215). Analysis techniques are particularly helpful for K-12 art educators whose aim it is to increase worldview through enhancing visual literacy, when students' communication through visual production, they engage the mind and body in important ways drawing from deep thinking, empathy, and knowledge (Gall, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Sri Aurobindo's notion of training the aesthetic being provides a link between aesthetics and analysis. This paper provides support for connecting Eastern philosophies with Western practice. As Pavitra (2006) points out, regarding Sri Aurobindo's ideas, education should be about creating independent thinkers, so that when they leave the education system they have the skills to continue on a path of lifelong learning through self-education (Pavitra, 2006). Sri Aurobindo's student-centered approach with self-education at the core provides an alternative view of education is provided. With the world of education constantly in a state of flux, trying to prepare students for a world that does not yet exist is a continual challenge. Through the process of visual analysis, we can begin the process of self-discovery, drawing on our intuition to gain a deep understanding of ourselves and the greater diversity of cultures and forms that make up the world (Gall, 2008).

Through the act of analysis, we ask students to participate in contemplative practice, and mindfulness by deeply engaging with the

artwork to gain understanding of ourselves and draw upon our shared understanding to provide a greater worldview. “What is important for art educators to keep in mind is that intuition is a form of knowledge by identity emerging out of the ‘self-being’ of the various parts of our complex being” (Gall, 2008, p.213). Here, Sri Aurobindo’s holistic ideas about education hold power for enhancing theoretical understanding in the East and West.

Underlining Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy, education needs to be humanized as we facilitate development through “enabling learners to find deep spiritual value in the most divergent and contradictory forms of existence” (Gall, 2008, p.215). Recently NAEA, has adopted the new tagline ‘shaping human potential’ which underscores Sri Aurobindo’s notion that as educators we aim to assist students to fully unlock their abilities of looking both inward and outward, from familiar to unfamiliar to provide skills in educating the self to realize our highest potential. Through these skills, we advocate that aesthetic education can be a key vehicle for creating a more compassionate and sustainable future (Roenpapel, 2015).

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