

A Framework for Arts Education

John Churchley, EdD
Assistant Superintendent – Human Resources
School District #73 (Kamloops/Thompson)

Principal Lecturer
Thompson Rivers University
jchurchley@sd73.bc.ca
jchurchley@tru.ca

Arts education advocates face the challenge to identify and define that which makes the arts unique and yet is also common to the discrete studies of dance, drama, music, and visual art. For my dissertation, I did a research study that presented the concept of aesthetic experiences as a response to this challenge. The study developed a conceptualization of aesthetic experiences in the context of Beattie School of the Arts - a Kindergarten to Grade 8 school in Kamloops, B.C. with a special focus on teaching all subjects through the arts (arts integration).

My original research purpose was to define and analyse the aesthetic experiences of students and teachers at Beattie. Using a grounded theory analysis of participant observation data collected as transcribed video, I developed a typology of 12 types of aesthetic experience:

- Somatic (physical response)
- Classic (response to the elements of art and design)
- Mythic (response to the narrative or “story”)
- Critical (a “social justice” response to work done by a marginalized artist)
- Spectacle (response to the technical “show” – lights, sound, staging, etc.)
- Comic (response to humour)
- Tragic (response to tragedy and pathos)
- Cathartic (intense experience at the climax of an arts event)
- Expressive (response to creativity)
- Sentimental (response to intense emotion)
- Relational (response to artists personally known to the audience)
- Pragmatic (response to a non-artistic use of the art such as learning)

This pluralistic definition of aesthetic experiences can be easily understood by laypersons who are unfamiliar with the arts, and provides a beginning to filling the gap in the literature for a “pragmatic” (in other words, “useful to practitioners”) definition that is an alternative to traditional “formalist” aesthetics.

As I reflected on my analysis of aesthetic experiences within the context of Beattie’s pedagogy and the BC fine arts curriculum, I began to make some connections between them. This reflection took me far beyond my original intended purpose. What eventually emerged at the end of this reflection was a framework - both conceptual and visual – that encapsulates a “complete” arts education program with a focus on the aesthetic experience (figure 1).

The framework looks at pedagogical content and practices that are connected to different types of aesthetic experience. It also suggests connections between these practices and content, the types of aesthetic experience and the British Columbia fine arts curriculum. As such, the framework provides a means to conceptualize the arts education program at Beattie, and potentially for other schools.

The basic visual format of the framework can be described as a “flower” with three “blossoms”, each with a common centre, which are, in turn, connected to a common centre. The common centre of the framework is a typology of aesthetic experiences, which is the primary focus of the framework. The aesthetic experiences are connected to all of the other blossoms of the framework.

The blossom on the right side is a pedagogical typology. This typology is based on the pedagogical practices of teachers of different disciplines at Beattie. These practices are interconnected with pedagogical content, which is the blossom on the bottom of the framework.

Finally the curriculum blossom is on the left. It represents part of the framework which comes from the British Columbia fine arts curriculum. I conceived the image for this part of the framework prior to embarking on this research in 1999 (figure 2).

The application of the framework

The application of this framework requires a switch of metaphors from a flower with multiple blossoms, to a menu, where items are selected a la carte. In this metaphor, a teacher would approach the planning of a lesson or unit by looking at the framework and choosing one or more petals from each blossom, as well as from the centre of each blossom. This means that a teacher would choose an arts discipline, the elements in that discipline and the principle(s) of design to use as a focus, and the skills to be used/learned; the pedagogical type; whether it was student-led or teacher-led (or a combination); the type(s) of content/catalyst to use; and the type(s) of aesthetic experience to teach explicitly or to elicit through the lesson. However, in reality, this is not typically how lessons and units are planned. There are many entry points to the planning of the lesson – starting from the curriculum (as noted above), from the content to use, or the even the pedagogical type to use. The point of using this framework as a planning tool is to ensure that the teacher is aware of and making connections with all parts of it.

To use the framework properly, teachers must ensure that they cover most if not all areas over the course of a year. This includes all types of pedagogy, content/catalyst, aesthetic experiences, and the elements related to each discipline and the principles of design from the curriculum blossom. Not all areas will likely be covered in an exactly equal fashion, nor should they be. The purpose of the framework is not to prescribe the exact mix of pedagogy, content, curriculum, and aesthetic experience but to increase the awareness of all types of each area, the

interconnectedness of all areas, as well as to increase the awareness of each teacher's own preferences for certain types. Having increased this awareness, teachers must work extra hard to ensure that they don't ignore or avoid areas that are not their preference – they should seek to balance them instead.

The focus of the framework, and therefore its application, must be the aesthetic experience. This means that all types of aesthetic experience are sought as the result of arts experiences. However, it also means that students should be taught explicitly about these experiences and what types of arts pedagogy and content are likely to construct each type.

As well as the explicit teaching about and through aesthetic experiences, teachers should seek to maximize the impact of summative arts events, such as performances, exhibitions, and sharing sessions, by layering multiple types of aesthetic experience. Students should also be taught how to do this, so that they can create their own powerful summative events. One means by which to maximize the layering of aesthetic experiences is to maximize the connections made between all areas of the framework. This not only crosses boundaries between the arts disciplines, it also increases the potential for students learning about the shared concepts and applying them themselves.

Here is an example scenario of how the framework could be applied at Beattie in an arts integration setting. This scenario is based on the type of planning that already happens at Beattie. The difference in this scenario is the coverage of all areas of the framework as well as a central focus on the aesthetic experience.

A scenario for the application for the framework

At a pod meeting, the teachers decide through a creative brainstorming process that they would like to use a theme of preserving the grasslands (a major geographic feature of the Kamloops area). Using this theme, they will plan a unit of 8-10 weeks, which covers all subjects of the elementary school curriculum (arts and non-arts), and is taught both in regular classroom settings and arts rotation classes. Having chosen the theme, they then brainstorm ideas for each blossom, trying to find ideas for each petal. They write down the ideas on a planning sheet which is a large version of the framework. This brainstorming isn't necessarily sequential – it progresses as the teachers get ideas and make connections with further ideas. However, it often starts with the non-arts content, which in this case might be science curriculum, such as the ecosystem of the grasslands, animals and plants of the grasslands, weather systems which affect the grasslands, etc. It might also involve other-created content, such as stories/novels which take place in the grasslands (perhaps with an aboriginal context), music inspired by the grasslands (such as works by Ferde Grofe and Aaron Copland), and visual art of the grasslands (such as paintings of the local grasslands by A.Y. Jackson and contemporary artists).

As these ideas are shared, ideas may evolve about further types of artistic content, pedagogical strategies to use, and connections with non-arts subject areas. For example, the dance teacher might think of some student-created dances that could be developed that demonstrate the interaction of animals, plants, and humans in the grasslands. As teachers create the lesson/unit ideas, specific concepts from the framework can be added. For example, the dance teacher may want the students to create their own dance in an ABA form (pedagogy: studio (student-led); curriculum: principles of design – pattern), demonstrating contrasting levels and pathways (curriculum: elements of dance), and their understanding of human interaction

with the grasslands ecosystem (content: non-arts), to create a multidimensional aesthetic experience including Classic, Pragmatic, and Critical types.

Finally, as the teachers decide on the various arts activities that will be used in their lessons, they may look for ways to share the learning from the unit in a summative form. While there would be opportunities for various types of aesthetic experience during the course of the lessons, the summative experience has been a good opportunity for significant aesthetic experiences for a large number of students and teachers at Beattie.

The summative event for this thematic unit would likely be a sharing session which would showcase a variety of arts products, created with different pedagogies. For example, the choir might sing a song about the prairies (having learned it through rehearsal) and the students might present the choreographed dances that they created in studio. The actual structure of the sharing session could be developed collaboratively with the students, with the professional guidance of the teacher-artists. Elements such as the order of the program, the layout of the performance area, the use of lights and sound, transitions, and the art selected for presentation all contribute to the overall aesthetic effect of the event. The skilled assembly of these elements can layer multiple aesthetic experiences (including Myth, Spectacle, and Catharsis) to create a powerful experience for the audience and the performers.

While its development was part of a small-scale and highly contextual study, this arts education framework provides a new way to envision arts education on a broad scale. Simply put, to use this arts education framework is to acknowledge a vision for arts education that Abbs has described in the UK, where

...all the arts belong together as one single epistemic community. It was held that the six great arts – visual art (including architecture and photography), drama, dance, music, film, and literature – form a family of related, if largely autonomous practices: they all

work through the aesthetic, all address the imagination, and all are concerned with the symbolic embodiment of human meaning. (Abbs 2003, p.57)

Abbs, P. (2003). Against the flow: Education, the arts and postmodern culture. London, RoutledgeFalmer.

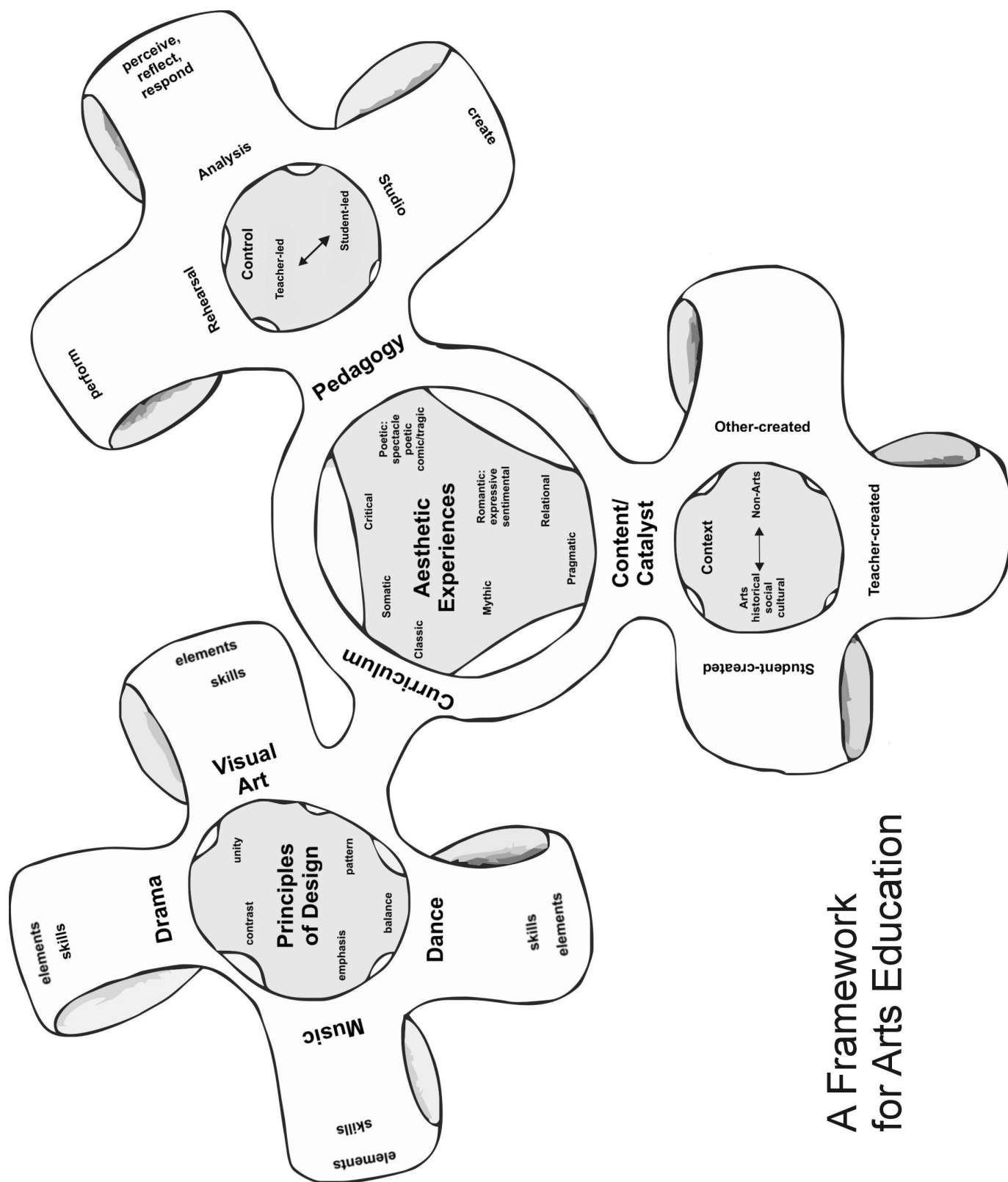
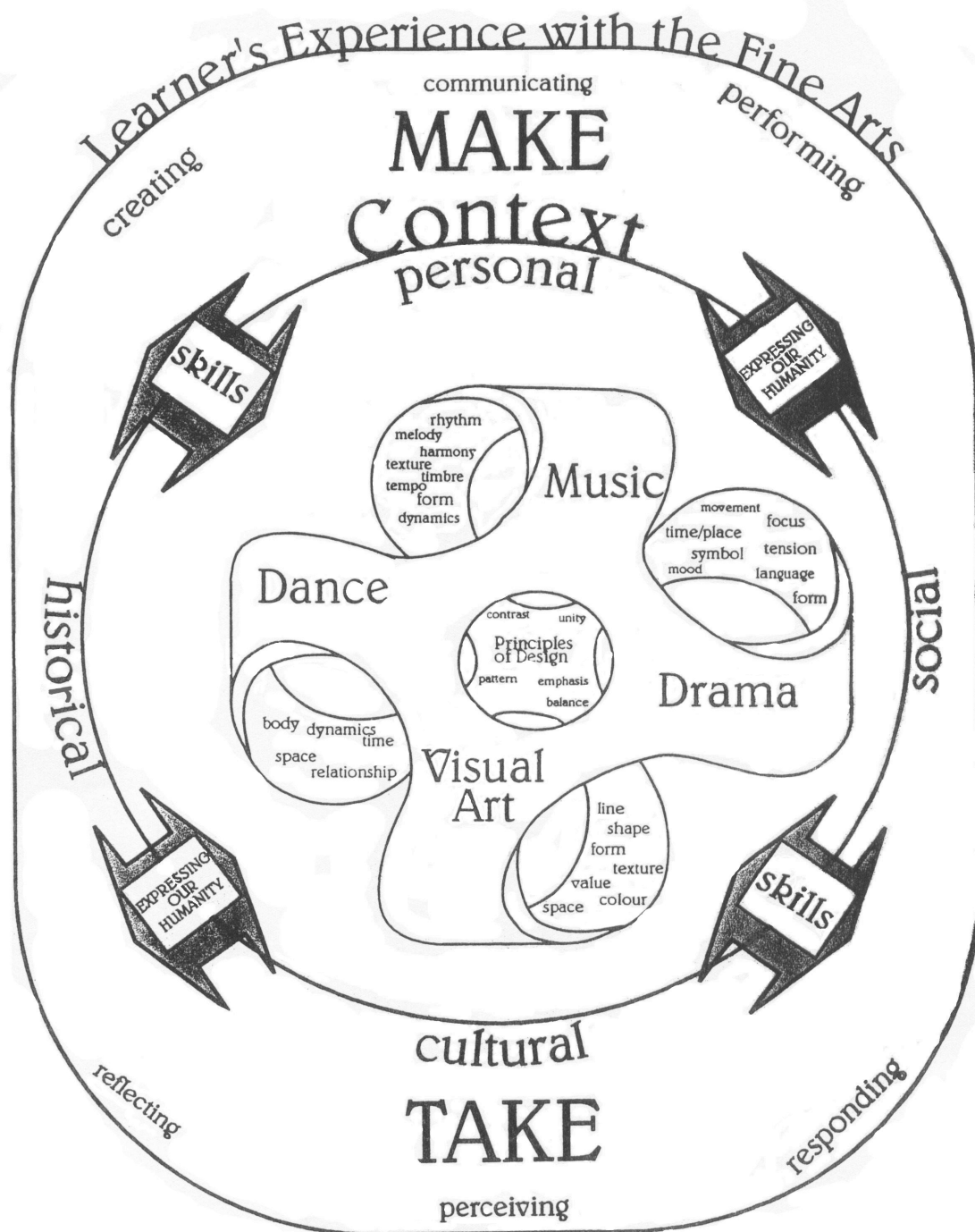


Figure 1.

A Framework for Arts Education



Churchley (1998)

Figure 2.