

## **Aesthetic Leadership and School Leadership Preparation: Cultivating Aesthetic Awareness Through an Arts-Based Leadership Development Curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

Aesthetic leadership is focused on the developed of leadership qualities and dispositions that contribute to a leader's emotional and sensory awareness and a general self-awareness. This article outlines three arts-based assignments that were used in developing leaders in order to illustrate the kind of work that can be done to promote the development of aesthetic awareness in leaders.

### **Key Words**

aesthetic leadership, leadership development, arts-based curriculum, emotional awareness

Aesthetic leadership is a style of leadership that has been variously positioned in leadership studies literature (Mannix & Daly, 2015). Dihn et al. (2014) describes aesthetic leadership theory as focusing on followers and their subjective views (gained through sensory awareness and knowledge) of the leader qualities in the leader-follower dyads. Others have argued that aesthetic leadership is fashioned by sensory knowledge (Hansen et al., 2007).

Hansen and colleagues contend that a significant feature of aesthetic leadership is the way in which followers' views on the leadership qualities are as important as the leaders' qualities. In other words, aesthetic leaders are not self appointed, but emerge from the perceptions of colleagues (Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2007). Mumford and Fried (2014) position aesthetic leadership as one of a number of ideological models of leadership that are, together with servant leadership and ethical leadership, values-oriented and focus primarily on moral behaviors.

In organizational studies literature, aesthetic leadership has been offered as a way of enabling flow between fields of management and administration (Guillet de Monthoux, 2007). In this interpretation, the management field is where visionary, action-oriented managers and economists operate and seek profits, while the administration field is occupied by those who value tradition, regulation, equality and a place for controlling costs.

The aesthetic part of the organization is where one seeks to determine what it means to provide or produce quality through "creative philosophizing" (Gulliet de Monthoux et al., 2007, p. 267). In some ways, aesthetic

leadership provides a buffer between management and administration.

Aesthetic leaders are those leaders who count tacit knowledge, a type of knowledge that resembles sensory/aesthetic knowing and is gained from deep indefinable know-how that defies logical explanation (Hansen et al., 2007). Proponents of aesthetic leadership argue that knowledge is formed, transformed, and transferred through interactions and connections with others. Aesthetic knowledge and awareness are ways of making meaning based on embodied experience (Woodward & Funk, 2010) and emotional tools that complement conventional ways of knowing (Bathurst et al., 2010).

In a review of the literature, aesthetic leadership is, in essence, a style of leadership underscored by sensory, somatic, and emotional awareness, and a strong moral purpose focused on the value of being fair, just, and truthful (Katz-Buonincontro, 2011).

### **What is the Role of Arts and Aesthetics in Leadership Preparation?**

While educational leadership and organizational management scholars have highlighted the need to improve leadership preparation (Millstein & Kruger, 1997; Murphy, 2006; Pounder, Reitzug & Young, 2002) by focusing on the quality and type of learning experiences, scholars have yet to fully examine how to incorporate aesthetics into leadership preparation (Kelehear, 2008) or to infuse lessons learned through art into leadership thought and practice (Crow & Grogan, 2005).

Most of the current demands of the field are focused around improving leadership accountability of student academic

performance and refining efforts to make university-based learning experience more relevant to professional experience.

Focusing on developing leaders who can make sense of their practice, air their assumptions about their abilities and organizational problems, and then revise their leadership approaches with actionable plans is one way of developing leadership. Duke's (1986) aesthetic leadership model, for example, builds on an analogy between the artistic process and the leadership process: Much like an artist, a leader's behavior shapes and alters the effects of experience.

### **Developing Aesthetic Awareness**

Emotions are often conceived as central to laying a foundation of empathy in order to understand another person's viewpoint (Smith, 1996). Brady and Hart (2006) build on this idea, presenting a more complex aspect of emotions; they argue that when leaders are empathic, they are more likely to remain open to understanding multiple, competing views.

Affect is highlighted in the context of working in the service of historically marginalized groups of people (English, 2008). This puts a twist on the model of charismatic leadership, which emphasizes the social psychology of influencing others through manipulation or emotional exploitation (Ladkin, 2006); scholarly orientations included inspiration, passion, engagement (Duke, 1986), and excitement or pleasure in one's work (Weggeman, Lammers & Akkermans, 2007). The expression and recognition of feelings as a legitimate source of knowledge (Taylor, 2002), even when feelings may be vague or difficult to express (Stein, 2003), is an important aspect of studying aesthetics in organizational life.

The leader's responsibility to promote connections between students, teachers and

staff on an emotional level—not just focusing on student performance—has been emphasized (Hurley, 2002). Emotions, in this sense, are conceived as a core foundation to help leaders become aware of their personal balance as they handle various stressors (Cowan, 2007).

The orientation toward caring, relational leadership has been associated with female leadership style in the past, but the current emphasis on compassion and empathy indicates that these aspects will continue to play an important role in leadership development regardless of gender.

### **The Assignments and Our Experience**

For sixteen years the first author, Diane, served as the director of the school leadership program at her institution. The second author, Betty, was a student of the first author and later taught early childhood leadership development courses at the same institution. Diane and Betty have collaborated as professor-student and later colleague-to-colleague for fifteen years. In the following paragraphs we outline assignments that Diane developed and Betty completed as a student. Betty later began teaching leadership development courses and refined some of the assignments through her personal experience and observations of the needs of her students.

Through the process of developing leaders, we are presented with opportunities to think deeply about connecting our students with deeper understanding and awareness of themselves. Our programs are small, enrolling between eight to twelve students per year. The size of the program helps to shape its highly relational orientation.

Over time, as professors of educational leadership and early childhood education, we used arts-based assignments that are intended to challenge students to consider the

multifaceted nature of leadership and the demand it makes on individuals.

### **Emotional Awareness: Assignment 1**

Emotional awareness offers significant and useful focus to apply to leadership preparation. This area of inquiry offers a lens to deeply examine the social-psychological aspects of leadership practice.

The purpose of an assignment focused on the development of emotional awareness is to evoke feeling to empathize in order to cultivate a creative, problem-solving mindset and empathy for students and families. In order for this to occur, activities need to be organized in expressive, interactive ways and allow for the openness of improvisational theater.

The sock puppet assignment is simple. Students are required to create three sock puppets: the first puppet should represent how they present themselves in the world, the second should represent elements of themselves that they keep hidden from others, and the third puppet represents their leadership identity which should be an integration of the first two puppets.

Many students resist this assignment at first glance, writing it off as silly or strange. Some students have offered to write research papers in order to avoid creating puppets, but we do not allow it. This assignment provides students the reflective space to explore aspects of their identity in an aesthetic manner (through thought, feeling, and sensory engagement) in order to make new meaning in relation to their future leadership.

The puppets have been made in every possible way – from great effort and detail to quick sketches on paper pasted on a sock. Sometimes students come to class with no puppets and only notes. The socks and how

they look are actually not the important part of this assignment. The goal of this assignment is to help students reflectively explore the beliefs about themselves in relation to leadership and to think deeply about the kinds of leaders they wish to become.

After completing this assignment and sharing it with their colleagues in class, students are required to write a reflection on lessons learned from the assignment. Jamal, an African American male student in the educational leadership program wrote in his reflection:

*At first I couldn't understand why we would be asked to do such a thing as make puppets, but then the day came for me to actually complete the task. I used a jet black sock for how I present to the world. I am acutely aware that my presence scares some people. My hidden self was a pink, lacey sock from my daughter's drawer. My leadership identity was a brown sock. My thinking was that I should tone my blackness down. In class, my colleagues challenged me to find ways to be my authentic self as a leader. I don't have to be a brown/black man (whatever that is). I have to understand myself and the societal dynamics at play.*

In this example, Jamal used the concrete assignment to explore racial dynamics that he was holding and that were affecting his leadership development. He was conflicted about how he could be seen as a leader and how his true self could emerge. Cultivating

emotional awareness is linked to instilling a moral purpose and this includes addressing “otherness” and “undemocratic” practices (Dantley, 2005, p. 39). The implication is that leadership development should reflect on the degree to which we address sociological perspective on educational policy and practice in our teaching. This means we cannot assume that developing leaders is a value-neutral activity. Another leadership student, Gloria, wrote:

*The hidden self-puppet was the hardest for me. I decided to be honest with myself about how bossy I can be and how much I need to be in control. As I was making the puppet I started to realize that my controlling nature probably wasn't much hidden at all – it is probably something everyone can see. If I was to lead I am going to have to tackle some hard personal issues first. Meeting with my classmates in class got me thinking about listening. I don't listen enough to lead. I am challenging myself to listen more and just move ahead with my ideas at the drop of a hat.*

Gloria reaches some understanding that her hidden self is seldom hidden—instead her hidden self is often on full display. Control issues cannot be managed in one graduate school assignment, but the larger issue is that Gloria is doing something very brave: she is looking at herself and the kind of leader she would like to become. She is also becoming aware of the importance of listening, a disposition related to emotional awareness and empathy.

### **Betty's Perspective**

As a student, Betty recalls the puppet assignment turned into a soul-searching

activity. She asked many questions: Did she worry about being accurate of how others see her? Did she worry about being true when showing a hidden part of herself? What parts does she intentionally hide from others? What image of leadership does she wish to present to others? She did not have quick answers to these questions.

At the time, her image of herself as a leader was unclear and it was a struggle to formulate because what was perceived as the requirements to be a leader did not fit with how she viewed herself. This nontraditional assignment pushed Betty and got her to use more than her analytical brain; she had to sort through her feelings and use courage to complete the assignment.

Fast forward a few years and Betty was using the sock puppet assignment in her early childhood leadership class. During the first year's implementation, she faced the challenge of students presenting the puppets as three disconnected aspects of self: here is what you know about me; here is what you do not know about me; here is what I look like as a leader. Betty reflected on what she had learned and what she wished for her students to learn from this assignment—that to be an authentic leader starts with knowing yourself, and leadership comes from allowing the truth of that deep connection with self to surface. She required her students to make the third puppet as an integration of the first two puppets plus a projection of how they see themselves as a leader. This was the actual assignment that she had been presented with years prior, but it was only through teaching leadership that she arrived at the profound potential of this assignment while developing leaders herself.

The resulting student reflections got closer to what Betty wanted her students to experience—the sensory engagement with the

art material, the discovery of feelings associated with self-reflection, the vulnerability of emotional connection with self and others as they present images of self through their puppets, and the tension that each student must confront while integrating different aspects of self into one image.

While art can inspire overtly, it operates covertly as well. For example, previously hidden aesthetic dimensions of work processes are no longer the exclusive domain of artists— aesthetic understanding is necessary in leadership grounded in the fact that beauty, harmony and the sublime exist in schools and not just museums, theaters, and concert halls. Arts-based assignments, as the one described in this article, can activate the imagination. How the imagination responds to leadership is personal and associative and tinged with affect and bodily rhythm, concerned with wordless knowledge, its whole knowledge of emotional experience, of virtual impulse, balance, conflict, the ways of living, dying and feeling.

### **Sensory and Somatic Awareness: Assignment 2**

Sensory and somatic attentiveness involves meaning and experience related to one's body. Ladkin (2008) notes that sensory and somatic awareness is the embodied way in which they [leaders] attempt to motivate, direct, and transform" (p. 39). A leader's senses and perceptive faculties guide her "gut feelings" about a particular choice (Weggeman, Lammers & Akkermans, 2007).

"Gut feelings" is a term that suggests an interrelationship between feeling and physicality. Sensation is rooted in both cognition and emotion and represents a kind of embodied knowledge. Strati (1992) discussed the way that a leader manages her physicality in terms of visibility and privacy within the physical setting by allowing or not allowing

subordinates to access her. A leader's physicality may be significant in that her actions form a sort of performance which followers observe and about which they make judgments.

The assignment related to cultivating sensory and somatic awareness is the self-regulation log. Students keep the log for six weeks, noting when they are triggered in physical ways in their work environment. After six weeks, students analyze their log and write a paper on strategies for growth.

Nina, a leadership student, noted:

*The self-regulation log caused me to consider what or who at work triggers my anger. Anger causes me to react physically, tensing and moving more quickly than I might normally. I am going to implement a strategy to listen more intently when colleagues disagree with me. I will work to pose questions in order to diffuse my initial response.*

For Nina and other students like her, identifying triggers helps in developing a more self-aware stance and an openness to others. By not allowing triggers to rule her responses, Nina will, we hope, have the ability to allow more points of view into decisions, instead of leading from her own singular perspective.

### **Betty's Perspective**

When Betty completed this assignment as a student it was an exercise of not just acknowledging what triggered her, but more importantly recognizing why she was triggered and how she responded to the trigger. Betty used the ABC of behavioral psychology as a structure in approaching this assignment: antecedent (what happened), behavior (my behavioral and physiological response), and

consequence (the impact of my action or the self-regulatory steps I took to reestablish physiological homeostasis) (Watson & Skinner, 2001; Sterling-Turner, Robinson & Wilczynski, 2001). Using this framework helped Betty go deeper into the assignment as a student.

As a professor, Betty found the depth of students' engagement with this assignment varied. At the most basic level, students identified moments when they experienced strong feelings such as anger, outrage, annoyance, or embarrassment. They were able to identify external factors that led to the experience of an intense feeling.

However, students rarely explored the internal factors or the *why* behind each feeling (why were you angry instead of just being annoyed) and the bodily responses (body temperature, sweat, heart rate, breathing, upset stomach, etc.) to the triggers they had identified. Students did not automatically analyze the strategies they used to calm down or to consider how they could stay engaged in the situation with the goal of achieving a productive outcome.

When students did not note these details in the log, it was hard for them to recognize a pattern of behaviors and responses and write a meaningful and emotionally aware reflection after six weeks. Betty found that offering students the Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence structure helped her students better organize the self-regulation log to increase their sensory and somatic awareness (Appendix A).

She also found that creating time in class for students to share what they have learned from their logs allowed them a chance to engage in a discourse that would push each other to think more deeply and gather perspectives that could lead to new

understandings. The result moved this assignment closer to what Betty had in mind—students made discoveries of how emotions were connected to their decision-making process, and learned what helped them stay regulated during heated exchanges at work.

A leader's physical presence is not divorced from how and what they communicate to others. Gaining insight into personal triggers contributes to regulatory capacities that help in moderating a leader's responses. If a leader's senses are used to interpret situations and the environment, then developing regulatory capacity in regard to social interactions is critical.

### **Promotion of Moral Purpose: Assignment 3**

Pursuing a moral purpose rounds out emotional awareness and sensory and somatic awareness. Instilling moral purpose is necessary for bringing people together around a common cause and appealing to the human desire to be noble and good. English (2008) advocated for a cognitive aesthetics lens that is sensitive to particular contexts, values, emotions, and moral function.

English underscored the role immorality plays in failed leadership. To English, "leadership is an embedded moral enterprise located and ultimately connected to one's sense of personal and historical identity within a specific culture" (p. 58). Because leadership development literature often emphasizes the establishment of a vision and organizational purpose, which derives from a leader's own moral compass, it is surprising this aspect is not emphasized more strongly in all theories of leadership.

Another assignment, the portrait assignment, requires students to create three portraits. The first portrait is of themselves

without themselves in it. The second is of themselves hidden. And the third is a portrait of themselves as a leader. There are no restrictions on how this assignment can be completed.

Students can take photographs, create drawings, or construct collages, or use another format. The goal of this assignment is to support students in clarifying their moral purpose. A portrait of themselves without them in it has to reflect their purpose. Like other assignments, after the students present their portraits to the class, they are required to reflect on the activity and write a reflection.

Anna, a leadership student, noted:

*At first I found this assignment confusing. A portrait of myself without me in it seemed ridiculous. The more I thought about it, however, the more serious it got. The portrait without me in it had to reflect my passion and purpose for leading. I took a picture of class with the students smiling. My moral purpose is to serve students.*

The challenge of seeing herself in a portrait that does not have her face forced Anna to consider what would represent her purpose. This sort of assignment has the potential to push students beyond bland statements of moral purpose, into an arena that allows them to explore their tacit knowledge and visually explore how they will represent themselves.

### **Betty's Perspective**

When Betty completed this assignment as a student, it confused her. She was unsure how she was supposed to construct a portrait of self without her face in it. Betty worked to anchor herself around the idea that the portraits reflected her identity across time (past, present,

future) and contexts (culture, race, gender, home, work, school).

She created portrait-collages that included three main themes: families, education, and politics. In the first self-portrait without her in it, she had shadow figures of adults and children surrounding the word *families*. In her portrait-collage as a leader, a drawing of the White House and of a school were set behind the images of families, and photo images of female leaders who Betty admired. She placed a photo image of herself right next to the female leaders and teacher colleagues. From this assignment, Betty identified her moral purpose as supporting children and families through education and advocacy.

A portrait of self without an image of self must have context. It requires students to think about what represents their moral stance and what they hold to be true and just. The assignment of the self-portrait was hard for Betty, as it is for all students, but as Betty worked on the assignment, her purpose came into focus and gained clarity. Even though Betty has not used this assignment in her early childhood leadership classes, she has used various classroom activities to underscore the importance of a leader understanding her moral purpose.

A sense of moral purpose may be the most important aesthetic quality to instill. Efforts to promote equity and question the status quo are a constant moral challenge to leaders. The implication is that educational leadership faculty should reflect on the degree to which they address sociological perspectives in their teaching.

### **Conclusion**

A focus on expressive, interactive activities can cultivate aesthetic understanding in leadership



classrooms. The assignments described in this paper pushed our students to develop attentiveness in order to help them gain greater understanding of how leaders move and act, not just talk and write, through embodied cognition. Visually-oriented activities such as watching or acting out scenarios, or using films and plays, can deepen a student's perceptual understanding of situations, an approach stressed in Kelehear's (2008) art-based instructional leadership practices.

As leadership faculty navigate school reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is imperative to

stress the emotional and moral bonds between educational leaders, teachers, students, families, and communities. These qualities will most likely strengthen current practices aimed at improving academic achievement, not dampen or derail those efforts. Many teachers and students strive for organizational beauty – coherence and harmony – in what can feel like a disconnected or fragmented learning climate. A focus on aesthetic leadership suggests we reclaim a focus on humanistic experiences of schooling and also challenge those of us who develop leaders to cultivate leaders who have social and emotional competence.

### **Author Biographies**

Diane Ketelle is dean of Mills College School of Education and a professor of education at Mills College in Oakland, CA. Ketelle's teaching in Mills College post-graduate programs in educational leadership has informed her practice as an administrator. Having taught in public schools, private universities, prisons, and in other countries as a two-time Fulbright Scholar, she brings a life-long commitment to education, to the liberal arts, and to an asset approach to education that values the cultural, emotional and linguistic knowledge that every person brings to the task of learning. Ketelle's research focuses on life writing and she has pursued many interesting projects including a three project in a prison helping inmates write their stories. For the past two years, she has been collecting the life stories of female boxers in the Bay Area of California. E-mail: [dketelle@mills.edu](mailto:dketelle@mills.edu)

Betty Lin is an adjunct professor and advisor in the school of education at Mills College. She has over 10 years of experience building early childhood education programs and preparing early childhood educators, special education teachers, and child life specialists at Mills College. She holds an early childhood special education teaching credential, a multiple subject teaching credential, an administrative service credential, and is a certified child life specialist. In addition, she is an advocate of early intervention and is serving as the state chair of the Infant Development Association of California. She was appointed as a steering committee member of the Alameda County Child Care Planning Council from 2008 to 2014. E-mail: [Bettylin5192@gmail.com](mailto:Bettylin5192@gmail.com)

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## Appendix A

### Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC Log)

Date/ Setting	<b>Antecedent</b> Description of the environment and what occurred prior to the behavior	<b>Behavior</b> What was done or said & by whom	<b>Consequence</b> Who responded immediately following the behavior? What was the response? Note changes to your body.	<b>Your response</b> Upon receiving the consequence, how did you respond?