

Aesthetic Engagement leads to growth, civic dialogue

Ability enables students to be active learners

Alverno's integrated, ability-based, liberal arts curriculum ensures all students will experience aesthetic learning across the disciplines. Since the inception of this unique learning approach in the 1970s, Alverno faculty has been committed to challenging students to develop skills in relation to artistic experiences. The Aesthetic Engagement ability has evolved from an earlier concept of the ability known as Aesthetic Responsiveness. Just as all of the abilities have changed to meet students' needs in an ever-changing world, Aesthetic Engagement has become an ability that fosters both personal growth and community involvement through interpretive dialogue and creative process.

The broad framework of the ability allows students to participate in the arts as both artists/performers and as active audience members. The ability ensures that students will not just respond to works of art, but rather develop the capacity to engage deeply with the arts by learning some of the processes associated with creative production. Engagement with the arts — through courses in the arts and in the humanities — involves developing strategies that enable students to be active learners across the curriculum. In beginning levels, students develop openness to arts and cultures. In intermediate levels, they refine artistic and interpretive choices by integrating experience and theory with cultural and social awareness. At the advanced levels, students create works of art and interpretive theories that synthesize personal

preferences with disciplinary concepts.

When students develop open approaches to engaging with diverse cultural expressions, they begin to experience the personal and social applications of aesthetic engagement. Whether they choose to approach this learning from a personal creative arts approach, from a wellness perspective, from interdisciplinary vantage points or from social-justice perspectives, students begin to see that aesthetic engagement can be an asset in building effective global communities.

A tool for meeting social challenges

Educational reform, for example, can be facilitated by using the arts to build literacy or communication skills with at-risk teens. Health care reform can be hastened by implementing cultural heritage models in HIV/AIDS education. Disaster relief efforts can benefit from mobilizing and employing art therapists with affected populations. Increasing voter turnout can result from the combined efforts of visual and performing artists. Returning war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders can benefit from the healing potential of music. Increased community awareness of violence or discrimination can be stimulated by theatrical productions. Sustainable environmental development can be accomplished by designers collaborating with business. Creative people are engaged in the economic, environmental and social needs of a complex

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world. Workers and citizens in the 21st Century need to develop cross-disciplinary methods, multi-layered processes and pro-active learning strategies. The Aesthetic Engagement ability seeks to create learners who are comfortable in non-linear contexts, adaptable to new situations and able to apply multiple intelligences.

Aesthetic learning tied to global awareness

The commitment to aesthetic practice is seen throughout the curriculum and in every major. Nursing students use art therapeutic models to enhance self and patient care, science and math students apply sophisticated visual observation skills to refine their inquiry-based approaches, humanities students pose provocative questions based on cultural awareness.

Curricular learning is supplemented by activities that engage the entire campus in aesthetic learning. Public events, such as music recitals, dance concerts, theatre productions and gallery shows, help to create an aesthetic environment as an extension of classroom learning.

Conferences build ongoing discourse, resources

One newer approach is the development of interdisciplinary conferences that focus upon a single shared learning experience for the community. Since 2002, interdisciplinary committees composed of Alverno College faculty, staff and local community, have collaborated to create general education conferences. These conferences have used gallery exhibitions to stimulate civic dialogue about important contemporary issues. The Art and Cultures gallery is dedicated to presenting artistic and cultural exhibitions that allow for expanded community access to practice aesthetic teaching and learning.

Conferences and gallery exhibitions have explored the following topics: “Sustaining Peace in the Wake of Violence: Representations of The Sierra Leone Civil War,” “Two Cultures – One Spirit – Wisconsin-Japan Exchange,” women and sustainable development, “Betty La Duke – Women’s Creative Hands,” “Sa-

cred Ground: Perspectives on Peace and Conflict,” and girls/women and media literacy, “Project Girl.” During the conferences, each topic has been explored through interdisciplinary inquiry that expands perspectives by using exhibited art forms to stimulate civic dialogue.

Most recently, in October, the 2009 General Education Conference, “Jim Crow and Beyond: Exploring the Past to Change the Future,” used the shared learning objects of two exhibitions — “Hateful Things: Traveling Exhibition” from the Ferris State University Museum of Racist Memorabilia and “Painful Paradox,” a juried exhibition of local artists sponsored by African American Artists Beginning to Educate Americans About African American Art (ABEA). The goals of this conference were to enable students to explore issues of American racist history as they uncover the dialogue necessary to build diversity, community and empowerment in the future.

Each conference has been developed with the goal of building ongoing discourse and resources to help students develop advanced, integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to ability learning that stimulate personal growth and civic dialogue about contemporary subjects. This approach to the use of art provides a point of departure from emotionally charged personal perspectives to more productive, object-based discussions.

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