

Teaching for Integration: Aesthetics, Resilience and Reflection

Professor Michelle LeBaron's presentation addresses aesthetic/arts-based methods that support student reflection and assist in synthesizing learning. These multi-modal methods have been applied and evaluated in several courses at University of British Columbia (UBC) and internationally. Michelle draws on curricula and pedagogy from her UBC courses on *Resilience and Legal Futures*, *Negotiation and Dispute Resolution* and her *LLM Legal Theory Seminar*, illustrating how experiential, aesthetic methods assist students with visualizing and achieving their goals while maintaining habits that support resilience. In particular, she draws on a course taught in Canada and South Africa on transitional justice and dispute resolution. She also addresses methods of effectively evaluating student achievement when aesthetic, experiential approaches are used.

Overview of session

- **Intro: Why use aesthetic/arts-based methods?**
- **Central question: How do aesthetic methods support student reflection and assist in synthesizing learning and reflective practice?**
- **Case example: Applying arts-based practices (ABPs) and experiential learning in a South African course abroad for Canadian students**
- **Key concepts arising from the South African work and collaboration with visual artist Dr. Kim Berman of the University of Johannesburg: artefactual agency and aesthetic negotiation**
- **Assignment related to artefactual agency and aesthetic negotiation: inviting reflection**
- **Evaluation methods: assessing student work in meaningful ways**
- **Case examples: background of the *Sarah Baartman* sculpture and *The Blue Dress***
- **Students' reflections on using ABPs**
- **Albie Sachs quote: why are arts and law complementary?**

Why use aesthetic/arts-based (APB) methods?

Theorists acknowledge the centrality of arts to everyday life in traditional societies (Dewey, 1934). Through the arts, identities and beliefs are transmitted across generations; rituals, festivals and celebrations reinforce shared cleavages and ritualize reconciliation after ruptured social harmony. In industrialized urban societies, the arts have become detached from the social fabric of daily life, relegated to the rarified atmosphere of performance venues; they have been robbed of their seamless utility as ways of smoothing conflicts (Thiongo, 1998). Conflict resolution scholar-practitioners collaborating with artists have pioneered the re-engagement of arts with social processes, recognizing that formulaic, instrumental conflict resolution

approaches (and related education practices) have done little to ameliorate complex conflicts (Zelizer, 2007; LeBaron and Honeyman, 2006; Lederach 2004).

How do aesthetic methods support student reflection and assist in synthesizing learning and reflective practice?

Zelizer (2004) concludes that arts are effective in engaging and learning about managing conflict because they: 1) increase empathy; 2) build relationships; 3) foster individual and collective reconciliation; 4) promote community empowerment; and 5) expand awareness and action toward social injustice.

Arts practices also foster resilience.

Arts are key to fostering cultural fluency. Across diverse worldviews, arts-based practices (ABPs) make diverse ways of seeing, being and engaging more accessible.

Further, arts operate below conscious awareness to access ways of seeing and being often missed in conventional pedagogy. These practices accent the physical and sensory rather than mental and analytical processes. They are helpful not only to conflict parties; ABPs help circumvent Western educators' and students' tendencies to miss the importance of the other-than-instrumental, of material that is outside the analytical. As perspectives are shared using artistic media—whether visual, auditory, kinesthetic or some combination of modes—they become visible in vivid, holistic ways that help students gain perspective, insight and experience empathy for others.

Dr. Iain McGilchrist's work on the two hemispheres of the brain applies here. We cannot address conflict or complex human communication dynamics through logic and rational analysis alone. We need both hemispheres of the brain.

Therefore, it is a necessary part of education to engage not only students' analytic and critical thinking capabilities, but also their imaginations, intuitions, and creativities. These are needed to address complex conflicts. In my previous writing, I've explored conflict as having three dimensions: material (tangible), relational (communicative) and symbolic (meanings and meaning-making processes). Conflict-engagement education is not only about material and relational aspects of conflict, but about the symbolic level: what a given conflict means to parties. Because this symbolic aspect of conflict may fuel intransigence and conflict escalation, it needs to be engaged in conflict analysis and intervention.

Arts modalities are particularly helpful in surfacing deeply embedded, symbolic meanings that cannot be directly named and may not even be consciously accessible. Meaning-making itself is a symbolic and dynamic process that can be brought to meaningful awareness through pedagogy with dividends for nurturing reflective practitioners.

Arts leader Dagmar Reichert (2016), founder of the Swiss NGO *Art as Foundation*, explains why arts processes are so potent in learning to engage conflict. While rationality and efficiency inform the dominant ethos of our time, they are not sufficient to foster reflective practice. To do this, we need the unsettling effects of art processes and their channels for experimentation with possibilities. The power of arts, Reichert writes, “is not to be found in specific themes or contents shared by art and mediation processes, but in an internal logic common to arts and peace building methods” (Reichert 2011). This logic, she maintains, is best described in philosophies of aesthetics. When pedagogy is conceived through an aesthetic lens, people come to touch something beyond utilitarian, technically-oriented, scientific ways of seeing and being.

Aesthetics and transformative art practices thus make it possible for students to see in more complex ways. In engaging conflict, they will be better able to foster improved relations, unsettling negative images of *the other*. In highly charged environments, ABPs can enable a suspension of reciprocally negative images and help facilitate an acknowledgement of difference without judgement or demonization. This pays dividends both within the classroom and in students’ practical work outside the classroom.

Applying arts-based practices and experiential learning in a South African course abroad for Canadian students

We tested these ideas in a course abroad, bringing UBC students to South Africa to learn about transitional justice, dispute resolution and peacebuilding. There, we worked with well-known visual artist Dr. Kim Berman of the University of Johannesburg, who has done pioneering work with ABPs.

Artefactual agency and aesthetic negotiation

Dr. Berman taught us that ABPs nurture artefactual agency and aesthetic negotiation. **Artefactual agency** links material objects to mobilisation and action. It draws attention to the capacity of objects to spark social action, conflict and collaboration. When we toured the South African Constitutional Court, we saw many examples of artefactual agency. The court itself was designed around art evoking the transition from Apartheid to democratic governance. One such example was the piece known as *The Blue Dress* by Judith Mason.

Aesthetic negotiation refers to reciprocal processes of artist- or community generated-works that open possibilities toward change. Both *The Blue Dress* and Willie Bester’s sculpture of Sarah Baartman (displayed at the University of Cape Town) are examples of aesthetic negotiation because they sparked a great deal of controversy and reflection amongst South African citizens and students.

Assignment design

Goal: To get the students to experience and reflect on their experiences in the light of **aesthetic negotiation** and **artefactual agency**

Assignment

Using a mode other than traditional academic writing, reflect on *The Blue Dress* or the *Sarah Baartman* sculpture. Make original work, reflecting on connections to peacebuilding in South Africa. Examples of modes include:

- photography
- poetry, journaling or narrative writing
- collage
- choreography
- playlist or other musical reflection
- painting, sketching, drawing
- weaving, needlework or other hand-made product

Evaluation methods

The goal of this component is to synthesize your experiences related to aesthetic negotiation and artefactual agency in South Africa using a mode other than scholarly writing. A short (no more than 1 page) description may accompany the creative piece.

Evaluation of this component will be according to the following criteria (note that *artistic merit is not a criterion* for evaluation):

- originality and creativity including thoughtfulness in synthesizing experiences and their relationships to aesthetic negotiation and artefactual agency
- evidence of depth of engagement with material
- demonstrated, explicit connections between your evolving assumptions, your reflective processes and the agency or action of you or others you encountered in South Africa
- clarity of expression
- clear evidence of awareness of aesthetic negotiation: *ie* how does what you have created connect to social change, understanding and addressing conflict or shifting negative imagery?
- evidence of multi-modal synthesis

Case examples

In the year 2000, the South African artist Willie Bester unveiled his sculpture of **Sarah Baartman** (a woman who was taken to Europe and paraded in London and Paris under the moniker "Hottentot Venus," her body was cruelly exhibited to paying crowds. She was heavily exploited as a symbol of colonial racism, 19th-century scientific curiosity, and exoticism in 1810. Baartman eventually died in Europe and her remains were repatriated to RSA in 2002). The sculpture was acquired by the University of Cape Town (UCT) for permanent display. Made from steel objects welded together, the sculpture depicts Sarah with chains at her feet; it is a life-size mechanical, machine-like figure with no clothing. The work is an assemblage of industrial debris, evoking a critique of the paradigms of scientific racism. Some saw it as instrumentalizing Sarah's body.

My Canadian students were deeply affected by the experience of seeing the sculpture, and conflicts that arose at UCT over whether she should be dressed or undressed. Questions of

dignity, instrumentalization of “the other” and ongoing legacies of colonialism arose as they considered the sculpture in relation to aesthetic negotiation and artefactual agency.

The Blue Dress. (*The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent*) is a powerful mixed-media triptych by South African artist Judith Mason. Located in the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, it serves as a moving memorial to Phila Ndwandwe, an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1988.

Mason wrote: “Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, house-wifey thing to do, an ordinary act ... Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets and drift on the tide and cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them.”

Students reported that seeing this art made of throw-away plastic bags left vivid impressions on them and generated questions about the nature of courage, living values into being and the role of law and art in conflictual societies.

The students’ arts-based work about Sarah Baartman and *The Blue Dress* (see below) ranged from drawings to poems to journal entries reflecting on racism, violence and conflict in and beyond Canada. Their grasp of aesthetic negotiation and artefactual agency was clear in their ABPs.

Students’ reflections on using ABPs

In general, ABPs invited the students to pause and focus on process rather than the works themselves, increasing self- and other-awareness. Several students said they had anticipated the creative reflection to be the easiest assignment they’d had in law school. They reported surprise that, for several of them, it was the most significant learning experience in their law school education because it caused them to reflect beyond the art itself to questions of how societies transition, what constitutes justice and how resistance is powerful. More personally, they also explored questions related to where they came from, how their identities relate to their trajectories, where they were headed, and why it matters. One student observed that, if they had continued the trajectory they were on before coming to South Africa, they would very likely have experienced relational failure and substance addiction. Another said that, through the ABP assignment, they came to regard their all-or-nothing approach to law school pressures as unhealthy. The ABP experience led them to gather additional resources for managing stress and working more productively, less manically.

Artefactual agency worked to bring meta-questions into clearer focus, and to give them

experiences of aesthetic negotiation, *i.e.* ways students can be aware of their social power as legal experts and ways they can use ABPs in their work.

Albie Sachs quote: why are arts and law complementary?

South African justice Albie Sachs, founding member of the South African Constitutional Court: quote on the connections/continuum between arts and rationality. Designed constitutional court around art.