Pondering a Peruvian Mystery, Part 2: The Artist's Way of Knowing

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The aesthetic realm of meaning

In the previous issue of *Synergy,* Part 1 of this article describes the nature of historical inquiry and the historian's way of knowing. The article describes how historians and archeologists are unravelling the mystery of the Nazca civilisation, which existed in Peru from 100 A.D. to 600 A.D. Evidence that yields the truth about Nazca's past is culled from the mysterious legacy of lines and drawings scratched into the surface of the land. These geoglyphs take the form of animals, flowers, plants, objects, or anthropomorphic figures. Speculation about their origin and meaning ranges from the supernatural to the extraterrestrial. This phenomenon serves as a metaphor for the way historians build deep understanding and new knowledge:

> *Like our students, archeologists are digging for information that is buried beneath the surface. They too struggle with sorting and evaluating information to make meaning of what they find in order to discover new knowledge* (Gordon, 2009).

When students engage with information they have initiated an inquiry process. Their sustained success depends on the help and intervention they receive in order to find meaning in the information. Implicit in the interventions designed and applied by classroom teachers and teacher-librarians are assumptions of what classroom teachers and teacher-librarians mean by 'inquiry' and 'deep understanding'.

This article defines aesthetic inquiry that is specific to the arts: Literature, music, dance, and the visual arts. The underlying premise is that there are realms to which academic disciplines belong. These realms serve as prisms that break down the light of human knowledge into distinct 'colours', or realms of meaning. This has consequences for how artists view the world and human experience, and how they express those views. It is a kind of inquiry, or way of knowing, that is characterised by imagination, rather than empirical methods. Phenix (1964) defines six realms of meaning. Each realm encompasses disciplines traditionally studied in schools (e.g., mathematics, science, history), as well as disciplines not usually included in primary and secondary school curricula (e.g., personal knowledge, moral knowledge, philosophy). These realms of meaning are useful for determining how to teach for meaning and deep understanding. This has important implications for inquiry situated in classrooms and school libraries. The rainbow concept of realms of meaning precludes a one-size-fits-all approach to 'doing research'. Instead it suggests multiple models of inquiry grounded in the distinct and unique intellectual traditions of the academic disciplines. This article looks at the artist's way of knowing, specifically through the study of literature, which belongs to the aesthetic realm of meaning. This realm informs the teaching of literature and the questions that such an approach raises about the role of the teacher-librarian in English and Language Arts inquiry. Examining oral traditions and artefacts left behind by the Nazca civilisation offers insights into how the visual artist, the storyteller, and the writer view the world through imagination.

Literature and the medium of language

The Nazca civilisation did not leave a recorded history or evidence of a written language so there is no literature that represents their aesthetic understanding of the world. Instead oral tradition has carried their stories across generations. The story found below has survived the journey and will serve to illustrate key concepts about the aesthetic realm.

Flesh-eating giants arrived by sea on reed rafts that were as large as big ships and landed in what is now known as Santa Elena. The giants are described as monstrous, with enormous heads and hair hanging down about their shoulders. Their eyes were as large as small plates. There were no women with them; the men were dressed in animal skins or nothing at all. They set up their camp like a village and dug wells in the rock until they came to water. After they built cisterns to distribute the water, they destroyed and ate everything in site, including fifty native people who were outnumbered by the giants. The giants were eventually defeated by an angel who slew them with a single stroke of a sharp, bright sword and a fearful fire from heaven that consumed them (Cieza de León, 1883).

As fantastic as this story seems, there may be some truth to it, as evidenced by a Peruvian museum exhibit of the bones that remain of the Giants of Saint Elena (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Remains of the Giants of Santa Elena

Is this exhibit genuine? Is the story based on fact? Is it a mythological representation of a real event, or is it pure fiction? These are questions historians would ask because they are interested in what really happened in the past. Aesthetics, however, is not interested in finding out what is true and not true in the literal sense. Literary language is essentially fictional; it is not designed to convey literal truth. Literary works, even when based on facts or delivered as a realistic story, are ideal abstractions. Aesthetic understanding is attained through direct perception of these abstractions, rather than through concepts (Phenix, 1964). Nor is the understanding expressed in propositions, as with scientific knowledge, but in particular objects.

For example, a weaving or piece of pottery, such as the Nazca objects shown in Fig. 2, can only be understood as unique objects that convey meaning through the medium of wool or clay. In the case of the story of the Saint Elena giants, the medium for expression is language. What makes the weaving, the pottery, and the story aesthetic objects of art is the medium that expresses their meaning, whether it is wool, clay, or language. The medium conveys details that make the work of art unique. In the Nazca story, these details are conveyed through descriptive propositions such as, ‘The men were wearing animal skins or nothing at all’. These propositions contribute to the content of the work of art but their truth or falsity is not the measure of the aesthetic meaning of the work.

Figure 2: Nazca Objects of Art

Similarly, the ability of a student to recall details of plot or descriptions of character and setting do not constitute aesthetic understanding. Tests, research papers, or any learning outcome that assesses knowledge and understanding based on this kind of detail cannot assess the learner's grasp of the work's meaning. Such understanding is the perception of the literary work as a particular, complex organisation of verbal symbols that communicate ideational, emotional, and sensuous meanings unique to that work (Phenix, 1964). This is more obvious in the case of a weaving or piece of pottery, since the medium of wool or clay is concrete, with observable properties such as colour, texture, and form. Language, however, is abstract and is experienced through imagination rather than directly through the senses.

It would seem that the literary arts have the advantage of using the commonly accepted and widely understood medium of language. However, language can create barriers to literary understanding. Though the same vocabulary and grammar apply to literary language and everyday language, or language applied to other realms and discipline such as history, the kind of language used varies. Hence students may confuse literary, or the aesthetic meanings of words, with their meanings in other realms. A major problem in the study of literature is to distinguish the various functions of language. Language used for aesthetic purposes conveys different meanings from language used for non-aesthetic purposes. In literature, language is deliberately exploited for its expressive effect rather than to describe things. Language is used to stimulate contemplation. Language is intended as a source of aesthetic delight and not as a means to another end. The language of art is non-discursive; it is not exclusively meant to tell a story. It is symbolic and metaphoric, offering layers of interpretation. This poses challenges for the design of learning experiences for aesthetic learning. Technology is a viable tool to meet this challenge. It offers a digital medium where web 2.0 tools, such as Wallwisher, encourage learners to play with language.

Through language, various patterns of sound and of imagery, symbol, metaphor, and myth are organised into a single expressive whole (Phenix, 1964). Literature differs from ordinary language in exploiting the rhythmic possibilities of language. There is an increased regularity in poetic devices and syntax, such as rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration. The art of literature depends on the possibility of using language figuratively, rather than literally or discursively. Figurative language includes literary images which stand for something inner and ideal. Images may be connected with the senses, and attach meaning to objects that become symbols. Symbols emerge as objects that refer to something other than themselves. A critical literary concept is metaphor, which contains an analogy between two different things and uses both image and symbol. When literary language is explicitly taught in the context of the literature, students move toward understanding the meaning of the literary work.

It seems that the single most important contribution that the school library can make to helping students develop a sensitivity to language as an art medium is to provide a strong poetry collection and to raise the profile of literary language through poetry slams and readings, poetry writing, musical lyrics, and web 2.0 tools. These initiatives, designed and implemented in collaboration with

classroom teachers, are intended not as ends in themselves, but as strategies to develop an understanding of literary language as the medium for aesthetic understanding.

Literature and structure

The patterns of literary language, including its rhythm and the devices used to elicit emotional responses, results in various kinds of literary works: fiction (including novel, short story, and epic), drama (prose or verse), and poetry. It is a misconception that recognising these genres and reading classic works of literature, while helpful, do not constitute literary understanding.

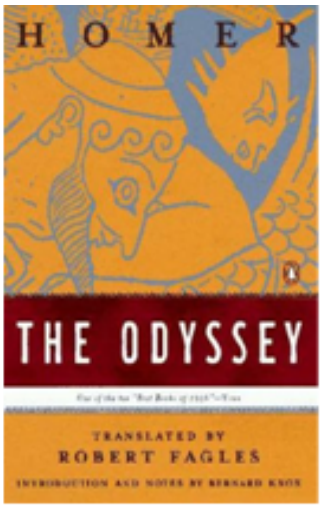
> *Since the meaning of the individual work, in the organisation of its elements into an expressive the whole work . . ., is the objective of literary understanding, classifications by genre, analyses of story, ordering by periods, and other such activities of technical literary scholarship are useful only as they help the reader discover the values inherent in the individual works . . .* (Phenix, 1964, p. 184).

Classification of literary works, analysis, and chronological ordering often structure typical assignments that require students to 'research' a period of literature, or a particular theme in literature, or the works of a particular author. These approaches may help the reader recognise values inherent in individual literary works, but they do not constitute literary understanding. A more productive assignment for literary research is the investigation of an individual work, with emphasis on the language of the work and its literary effects. The telling of plot or the development of character is achieved by skillful composition which conveys a powerful illusion of reality. The artist aims to present a convincing portrayal of human existence. Through theme, a literary work communicates universal truths. Understanding the elements of fiction, i.e., plot, character, setting, and theme, in studies of individual works promotes literary understanding when the assignment asks students to make connections between those elements and literary language.

In addition to the language of the individual work and its structure as defined by its genre and elements, the use of myth also adds to the imaginative quality of literary language and expression. Myth refers to the narrative presentation of archetypal, eternal, ideal, or eschatological meanings (Phenix, 1964), such as the idea of "hero" or that, "Good triumphs over evil." Myths are expressions of important social meanings conveyed through images. They create a picture of a community's beliefs. The story of the Nazca giants clearly conveys the belief in salvation through divine intervention: "The giants were eventually defeated by an angel who slew them with a single stroke of a sharp, bright sword and a fearful fire from heaven that consumed them". If this story became an episode in a written epic similar to the adventures of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, the story would reach the status of a literary object of art that could be studied through the lens of aesthetic inquiry because it contains the archetypal ideals. However, the written language that is the medium of the story must rise to the figurative level.

What happens to the integrity of a literary work when we alter its structure? For example, what if the hero of a young adult novel is a young boy with magical powers? Is the YA novel a literary object? Suppose Homer's *Odyssey* is published in an easy-to-read version for low-achieving students? (Fig. 3). Can we use a graphic novel, rather than the full-text, to teach literature? However, storybooks, graphic and young adult novels can be literary works of art depending on the nature of the language in the individual work. The aesthetic quality of the work is not dependent upon its genre. In addition, there is a research-based rationale for encouraging learners to read what interests them. The more children read, the better they read (Krashen, 2004). When they read better, they choose more challenging reading materials.If we are serious about promoting reading for all children, personalised approaches that value the disposition and preferences of all children will drive the way educator's promote reading outside of the realm of aesthetic understanding.

Figure 3: Good overcomes evil. What is literature and what is not?



When the intent of the classroom teacher or teacher-librarian shifts from teaching aesthetic appreciation to reading motivation, criteria for selection of reading materials also shifts. There is a sliding scale of expectations for selection. If the purpose is to engage young people so that they will read more, and thereby improve as readers, it does not matter whether the reading matter is literature or not. What does matter is that the reader can be engaged in the reading. Methods of promoting reading also matter. Choosing to offer external rewards for reading send the message that reading is not fun, or is not its own reward, or that it does not have intrinsic value. A parent, who is also a writer, expressed concern about a product called Accelerated Reader that assigns a varying number of points to the books in the program. Children earn these points by reading the books and taking a quiz to earn points.

> *Librarians and teachers report that students will almost always refuse to read a book not on the Accelerated Reader list, because they won't receive points. They base their reading choices not on something they think looks interesting, but by how many points they will get. The passion and serendipity of choosing a book at the library based on the subject or the cover or the first page is nearly gone, as well as the excitement of reading a book simply for pleasure* (Straight, 2009).

Although there is a sound educational reason for teaching literature for aesthetic meaning, the practice inevitably creates a hierarchy of reading materials, placing a greater value on fiction than on non-fiction. Within the genre of fiction, particular value is seen in the 'classics' which are considered literary works of art. These judgments have the most profound implications for low achievers and boys. The former may not have reading ability, motivation, interest, or reading experience that contributes to the disposition to read for aesthetic understanding. There is often no provision to scaffold the skills they need in order to prepare them for developing deep aesthetic understanding. The result is children who have a desperate need to know that there is beauty, order, rhythm, and meaning between the covers of a book, never learn the joy of literary aesthetics. Boys, on the other hand, may not have the inclination to read fiction or poetry. Research tells us that they prefer non-fiction, and this finding is useful for building engagement with reading. They may rebel when asked to read a Jane Austen novel, but that does not mean, they do need, or are not able, to experience deep aesthetic understanding.

The lack of explicit distinction between reading for aesthetic understanding and reading motivation may lead to bogus issues about whether the classics should be taught, or whether 'inferior' reading should be part of the library collection. This conflict needs to be resolved so that children can read the books they want to read, rather than the books they think they should read. Implicit in the duality between literary works and popular reading is the last criteria for teaching for aesthetic literary understanding: teaching learners to be critical and evaluative readers.

Literature and criticism

Critical skills of analysis, synthesis (or creativity), and evaluation address the issue of what is worth reading as children develop their reading skills. Teaching children to be critical, i.e., to evaluate their experiences, and, in this case, make judgments about a literary work, is a thinking skill high on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. However, these skills cannot be taught through direct instruction. Rather, they are the result of becoming a proficient reader through reading, and climbing reading ladders as literary understanding is developing. This is a preliminary phase of literary scholarship: novices become more discriminatory as they become better readers.

There are two ways to approach teaching textual criticism. The first is through external criticism, or the study of the circumstances of composition. For example, students may come to the school library to research the Jazz Age prior to reading *The Great Gatsby*, or the life of Ernest Hemingway before reading *A Call to* Arms. The extrinsic approach interprets literature in terms of biographical, psychological, social, economic, political factors presumed to have influenced it. This is a preliminary to reading for aesthetic understanding. Although students may find information that is of value in understanding a literary work, it is not to be confused with deep literary understanding. Most of the time English/Language Arts students work in the school library; they are engaged in external textual criticism. This is not a bad thing IF what they learn about the circumstances around the composition of a literary work is connected to the language and structure of the work. When the relevance of extrinsic factors of a literary work is connected to its intrinsic significance, literary understanding is being taught. For example, biographical knowledge may explain allusions in the author's work, the chronology of his writings, and the relationship to other works, or other writers, or events of the time. These factors, however, are not in themselves aesthetically significant. Psychology of literary composition tells nothing about aesthetic meaning. Psychological information can contribute to understand only if it permits the discrimination of qualities and relationships that might otherwise be perceived less clearly. *Hamlet*, for example, is illuminated by a psychoanalytic interpretation. Social, economic, and political contexts are instrumental in developing literary understanding of the work. It is erroneous, however, to evaluate any work of literature on the basis of its contribution to any social goals. Literature is not intended to be a philosophic treatise. Information found must be relevant to the aesthetic purpose of the work. "The meaning of the work is a system of inter-subjective values, that is, of perceptual abstractions that the work has the power to evoke in all who read it attentively and sympathetically" (Phenix, 1964, p. 182).

A second kind of textual criticism is internal, which is analysis of language, style, allusions, and explicit statements in the literary work. The intrinsic approach examines the structure of the literature. "The intrinsic approach is clearly the more essential because it captures the distinctiveness and relative autonomy of literary understanding in the aesthetic mode" (Phenix, 1964, p. 180). The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic analyses raises questions about how the school library supports teaching for deep understanding in the aesthetic realm and the critical nature of collaboration. The English teacher brings the expertise of literary language and the teacher-librarian contributes her understanding of the nature of aesthetic inquiry, along with information tools, including resources and skills which enable the investigation.

Teaching for deep understanding takes place in a culture of inquiry characterised by collaboration, where classroom teachers and teacher-librarians share a deep understanding of the aesthetic realm of meaning. The deep aesthetic understanding of the classroom teacher and teacher-librarian informs teaching decisions and ultimately, the quality of learning outcomes. How can we assess learning activities to determine whether they promote literary understanding?

Principles of teaching for deep aesthetic understanding

1. Does the activity promote literary understanding through the language of the literary work studied?
2. Is the study of the elements of fiction connected to understanding the literary language of the work studied?
3. Are the purposes of teaching literature for aesthetic understanding distinguished from the promotion of reading that is motivational in intent, rather than instructive?
4. Are extrinsic methods of textual criticism linked to the literary language of the literary work?
5. Are intrinsic methods of textual criticism used to promote deep understanding of literary works?
6. Is the medium of language of the individual literary work taught in the context of the human experience?

While language is common to each of these principles, its meaning cannot be separated from the human experience. The parent concerned with reading by numbers, or points assigned to literary works, captures the spirit of aesthetics.

> *Not long ago, I went back and re-reread three of my own favorite books of all time, books that made me into a writer. They introduced me to my heroines, girls who grew up in real hardship in vibrantly rendered landscapes that I had never seen before. Anne, in Anne of Green Gables, made me understand friendship and 'kindred spirits' and imagination. Francie, in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, made me ache at the injustice of having a charming alcoholic father (his suit drying green after he falls into the bay while fishing) and a mother who cannot love her as much as she loves her more handsome brother. And Nel, the quieter half of the inimitable pair of friends in Sula, made me feel the way girls love each other intensely in childhood, captured in the precise and lovely language of lines like this: 'We were two throats and one eye and we had no price'.*

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