

# Unity-in-diversity A framework for aesthetic appreciation in addressing global challenges within and beyond art education

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the educational challenges surrounding the teaching of aesthetic engagement in technological societies, where the arts are often overshadowed. It highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic engagement and proposes a transdisciplinary approach to aesthetic appreciation based on the “unity-in-diversity” framework. This framework aims to foster empathy, inclusivity, and critical reflection. In doing so, it offers a valuable means of addressing global crises in an increasingly technological era.

## **Keywords**

aesthetic engagement; aesthetic appreciation; unity-in-diversity; beauty; aesthetic education; crisis; educational challenges; humanities; arts; sensory awareness; openness; understanding

## **Humanities and educational challenges in a technological epoch**

The origins of the modern school system as we know it today can be dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period of industrialization, the need to educate a new workforce became fundamental; the emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and technology is not unique to our current epoch. However, in recent decades, political and societal shifts towards prioritizing technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines and related career paths have resulted in a corresponding decline in the relevance of the humanities. Philosopher of education Laura d’Olimpio highlights that these disciplines have struggled in the system as “a result of attempting to defend their value in narrowly utilitarian terms that increasingly correlate to test scores and achievement in other subjects” (D’Olimpio 2022, 240). In alignment with d’Olimpio, educationalist Marisa Musaio, who worked on the dimension of beauty as a component of educability, also critiques the prevailing trend in education that prioritizes quantifiable technological and instrumental dimensions, while marginalizing the qualitative aspects of learning (Musaio 2013). This concern resonates with the work of Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti (1999), who examined the implications of living in an “*età della tecnica*” (“epoch of technology”) at the end of the previous millennium. Galimberti highlights how technology in an era of rapid societal change has shifted from being a mere auxiliary tool

at humanity's disposal to an overarching apparatus governed by the imperatives of efficiency, productivity, achievement, and functionality. In this Western cultural climate, it is unsurprising that the arts and humanities are increasingly marginalized in favour of a more utilitarian and function-driven approach.

Among all humanities, arts have probably suffered the most. Art education should not solely aim to familiarize students with different forms of art on which they are assessed through objective tests. In a broader sense, aesthetic education entails "the cultivation of aesthetic understanding and imagination through active engagement with visual and performing arts"; this engagement enables individuals to interpret diverse forms of expression and communicate through various modes of representation (Costantino 2015, 230).

One key aspect of aesthetic education is aesthetic appreciation, or the appreciation of beauty, which scholars describe as "the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds" (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 537). Unfortunately, beauty has long suffered from a negative reputation, often dismissed as mere superficiality. As Ramsey Affifi demonstrates, it has been even regarded by some philosophers as a nefarious device:

"an undeserved privilege; a mechanism of exclusion (Berry, 2008); a tool for social capital (Bourdieu, 1984); an addiction fostered by, and in turn perpetuating neoliberalism (Pow, 2009)" (Affifi 2020, 1127).

Nevertheless, while beauty may be used to propagate harm, this does not necessarily imply that beauty itself is harmful or should be abandoned (Affifi 2020).

In the meantime, we find ourselves in an era marked by profound crisis. The current geopolitical landscape is characterized by instability caused by a seemingly endless array of ongoing conflicts. Climate change threatens the very biodiversity of our planet. Considering such urgent concerns, one might rightfully ask, "Who has the time for arts and aesthetic engagement?" As Ramsey Affifi properly phrased it, "Is beauty important or a luxury distracting from work of great urgency?" (Affifi 2020, 1126).

This article argues that it is essential to recognize the intrinsic value of beauty. It presents a framework for understanding aesthetic appreciation based on the concept of "unity-in-diversity." Rather than providing definitive solutions, the article outlines a potential direction to apply this framework in aesthetic education from a transdisciplinary perspective.

### **Unity-in-diversity framework**

Professor of psychology Rhett Diessner and his colleagues have proposed an intriguing definition of beauty, or at least a key component of it: unity-in-diversity (Diessner et al. 2018). They explain that "unity-in-diversity means that a variety of elements are organized into a meaningful whole. That is, the contents are the diversity and the form is the whole" (Diessner et al. 2018, 378). This definition is also supported by Affifi: "Aesthetic experience of beauty involves perceiving the coherence of the relationship between something and its various parts."

(Affifi 2020, 1127). Diessner and his colleagues highlight that “a variety of philosophers, across two and half millennia, consider unity-in-diversity as an important criterion for an experience of beauty” (Diessner et al. 2018, 379). They cite figures such as Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Marsilio Ficino, John Dewey, Santayana, Benedetto Croce, and Francis Hutcheson (who most explicitly identifies unity-in-diversity as the cause of beauty). Unity-in-diversity also seems to align with Maxine Greene’s “wide-awakeness,” a concept that not only involves a deep appreciation and active engagement with diversity but at the same time also “brings forth the recognition of communities, realizing that everyone is in a state of sameness” (Fenech 2023, 41).

The “unity-in-diversity” framework appears to encompass a wide range of sources of aesthetic engagement, including the arts, the natural environment, and ethics. Diessner, et al. illustrates the broadness of this conception of beauty with the example of a forest: when one perceives the beauty of a forest, one observes the harmonious integration of various diverse elements (trees, shrubs, flowers, insects, fungi, and others) into the forest itself as a unified whole (Diessner et. al. 2018). They continue: “Now imagine this forest clear-cut. Its diversity has plummeted, and the form of unity it once had is destroyed; it is now an ugly space” (Diessner et al. 2018, 378). Moral beauty is also inherently acknowledged through the principle of unity-in-diversity (Diessner 2016). This concept offers a vision for social justice, wherein diverse nations and populations collaborate to address complex global challenges while preserving their distinct identities. Such applications suggest that aesthetic appreciation should not be confined solely to aesthetic education but should also be regarded as an activity with a broader scope. Musaiò (2013) argues that beauty is not merely a concern of aesthetic theory and critics but is an integral aspect of human nature. Even though the arts remain the primary expression of humanity’s aesthetic dimension, Musaiò suggests overcoming the idea of an aesthetic education exclusively in connection with artistic education in order to understand the meaning that aesthetics plays in education.

### **Aesthetic engagement as a participatory act**

The unity-in-diversity framework provides a valuable lens through which to understand aesthetic engagement as a participatory and relational act. This relational act is the basis of empathic understanding. Aesthetic engagement is here considered an intentional and immersive experience, one of participatory sense-making that emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation (Brinck 2017; Berleant 2013). This experience has a unity and transcends the subject-object dichotomy (Dewey 1934). Aesthetic engagement acknowledges that beauty or aesthetic value in a broader sense does not reside solely in the object or the perceiver, but emerges as a defining aspect of the reciprocal process of perceptual participation between the viewer and the object (Berleant 2013). Within the unity-in-diversity framework, the observer and the observed are integrated into a single whole, both recognizing this is fundamental for sparking new insights. Aesthetic engagement promotes an alternative

mode of thinking and provides tools to address the various aspects of the crisis we are facing (Musaio 2013).

### **A two-step approach to the framework**

How might aesthetic appreciation be integrated into the unity-in-diversity framework? My intention in this discussion is not to provide definitive answers, but rather to propose a few possible steps for applying this framework in educational settings and broader contexts.

The initial step involves cultivating sensory awareness. Drawing upon the earlier example of the forest presented by Diessner and his colleagues, in order to recognize the harmonious integration of various diverse elements into a unified whole, it is essential to engage with the world through the senses. For example, this sensory awareness is cultivated by encouraging students to observe an artwork attentively in the present moment, focusing on experiencing it for what it is rather than immediately interpreting it. The aim is to engage with its colours, shapes, and textures. Drawing upon the work of Denis Dutton (2009), D'Olimpio further emphasises that “human beings are naturally predisposed to appreciate and enjoy beauty, form, shape, texture, colour, line, movement, sound and other aesthetic features of our environment” (D'Olimpio 2022, 240). In this context, sensory awareness aligns with the first level of visual analysis proposed by the semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas. According to Greimas, when initially engaging with an image, it is essential to direct one's attention to its configuration, or plastic level, focusing on shapes, lines, and colours independent of the content that the image represents. Some will rightfully see a connection between sensory awareness and mindfulness; as defined by Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 144). This initial step facilitates a form of embodied engagement, where the aesthetic experience unfolds through the body. In this state of openness, the second step involves nurturing the ability to respond to the stimuli presented at the plastic level and fostering the development of sensibility. At this stage, students are encouraged to explore and reflect upon their emotional responses while observing the entirety of the artwork. This is not merely about identifying feelings. Rather, it is about developing an awareness of how the artwork engages with students' inner state, blending the boundaries between object and subject. Students are encouraged to recognize the nuanced relationship between the aesthetic qualities of the work and their own emotional responses, thereby enriching their overall aesthetic experience. The first step focuses on the details (diversity), and the second step focuses on the whole (unity).

From the micro to the macro level, a thought-provoking approach would be to apply these two steps by first introducing an artwork from a culture unfamiliar to the students, then reflecting on the classroom space, and finally extending the consideration to a public space. Is beauty perceived there? For example, in a civic education setting the unity-in-diversity framework can be applied through a project that invites students to explore their urban environment with fresh eyes. In the first stage, students take sensory walks through different neighbourhoods, observing diverse elements and documenting their emotional responses and aesthetic

impressions. In the second stage, students work collaboratively to design a proposal for a public space, integrating their diverse observations into a cohesive vision and exploring how beauty and goodness can emerge from the thoughtful unification of diverse perspectives. Beauty is inherently linked to the concept of care: what is perceived as beautiful is often considered worth protecting, and the care and attention devoted to something can, in turn, enhance its beauty. What will happen when applying a beauty-focused approach to other subjects? Affifi (2020) provides an example of a beauty-focused approach to biology:

“Phytoplankton photosynthesis no longer seems remote and dry when one’s beloved whales depend on them. The Calvin cycle may finally take on some urgency when one learns its critical enzymes can be disrupted by heavy metal pollution” (Affifi 2020, 1136).

This example shows the potential of including aesthetic appreciation in fields outside of art education, which can make students more aware of their environment and prompt them to action when their aesthetic appreciation is threatened. Diessner and Niemiec have demonstrated that the personality trait of beauty appreciation exhibits the strongest correlation with pro-environmental behaviours as well as with the prosocial-boosting emotion of elevation. According to their findings, the appreciation of beauty may be the personality trait most likely to foster the behaviours necessary to mitigate the destructive impacts of pollution and climate change (Diessner and Niemiec 2023).

Within this paradigm, the concept of beauty is no longer relegated to abstract ideals but rather becomes more concrete and open to scrutiny. Through aesthetic engagement, we aim to cultivate openness, empathy, and a sincere desire for understanding. One way we share our life experiences is by capturing them through various media. This enables us to share them with others, and “this sharing of experience, rendered aesthetically, unites us, helps us to understand ourselves, one another and the environment in which we exist” (D’Olimpio 2024, 147).

## **Conclusion**

Aesthetic appreciation within this framework is not a global panacea. While the unity-in-diversity framework provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of aesthetic engagement, it is not a cure-all. However, it does offer a meaningful pathway for cultivating a more intentional aesthetic engagement with the world around us. By framing aesthetic appreciation as a relational and participatory experience, the unity-in-diversity framework encourages empathy, awareness, critical reflection, and inclusivity, all of which are necessary for addressing the complex challenges of our time. Ultimately, we may find that aesthetic appreciation serves as a powerful tool for fostering more compassionate and responsive societies.

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