

Sensory Awareness Part 1.

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This file is based on work originally written by Max Darby that has been adapted in 2010

So much of our modern technological knowledge and development is directed either to prolonging life or destroying it; yet, so little concern or attention is focused on trying to enhance it. (Max Darby, Images in Life, 1986. P. 171).

This file is presented in 2 parts:

1. **Introductory Essay** – about the importance of the senses
2. **A List of Activities** – developing Sensory Awareness.

The Introductory Essay is designed for teachers and senior students. It raises many issues and ideas to provoke thought and discussion. You can make a contribution in the location provided at the end of the file.

The List of Activities is designed for students and outlines the kind of things that teachers can use in class. It also provides a model for designing your own activities or for extending and modifying those that are provided below.

The Introductory Essay is in this file (below) and The List of Activities is in the file titled Sensory Awareness Part 2 – on

this website.

1. Introductory Essay:

Developing an awareness of the world through the senses.

Dr. Max Darby.

We often look but how much do we really see? As we walk along a path we glance ahead for obstacles or things of interest, but we often don't take notice of many of the details along the way. Sometimes our mind is so preoccupied with all kinds of problems or concerns that many interesting visual qualities and objects of beauty or interest pass by unnoticed. Eyes look at things without taking in much of the data before them: without registering the infinite range of information and stimuli which sight provides.

Given that art is primarily a visual medium, there needs to be more emphasis in the Art Program to the development of visual awareness and perception; awareness and perception that underpins our own creative expression as well as our understanding of what artists have achieved. One important feature of the visual arts is an appreciation of the aesthetic. It is interesting that when we are exposed to an *anaesthetic* one of its characteristics is to deaden the senses – sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. One of the intentions of an art class, then, should be to heighten awareness to the senses, especially to those that can be related to visual art forms.

Perhaps one of the most important qualities teachers can develop in their students is a deeper awareness for the richness of many of their experiences through greater use of their senses and feelings, but particularly that of 'seeing'.

The following anecdote about well-known, blind, American author Heller Keller (Arthur Syverson, "Seeing Things", *Vision*, 12 March, 1961) illustrates how easily experience through the senses might be taken for granted:

Helen Keller tells of a friend of hers who walked through the woods.

When she was asked what she saw on her walk she replied, "Nothing in

in particular". Miss Keller could not imagine how anyone could possibly walk through the woods and see "nothing in particular". Helen Keller must see through her fingers because she lost her eyesight through severe illness when she was a very small child. Yet, Miss Keller can appreciate the symmetry, texture and variety of the leaves. She thrills at the touch of the smooth bark of the birch tree and the tough bark of the elm tree. She delights at the feel of the first buds on the branches and special fragrance that announces that it is "springtime".

From birth we rely to a great extent upon the use of the senses to provide information essential to our survival. Throughout our childhood, the senses are used extensively for learning through discovery. By the time we become adults many have had their senses dulled, their inquisitive nature destroyed through continuous bombardment of technical, electronic and entertainment devices such as plasma and digital image television, hi-fidelity and surround sound, special effects in movies and the extensive use of computer

graphics, I-pods, I-phones, advertising and computer games.

This anecdote reminds of one of my own friends who jogs daily during her lunch break along the river and around Melbourne's magnificent Botanical Gardens wearing her 'Ipod' so that she can listen to her favorite music as she exercises. Her aim in running is to maintain fitness, alertness and good health and to relieve the tension and stress of her daily work; the pressures of the office and the 'rat-race of commercial life and the overpowering sounds of the city (her description). The sounds she listens to along the way, however, are 'artificial, electronically produced, constructed and dulling compared to the natural beauty available to her – the sounds of the birds and wind in the trees, the rustle of leaves blowing on the ground and even the sound of children at play.

It is a paradox that she tries to escape from an artificial world by venturing into natural surroundings, yet she takes with her the trappings of her artificially constructed environment. The issue raised here isn't that music or the constructed environment is destructive to our humanness, or that people running should never take their music with them. It is that an excellent opportunity was missed to recharge the batteries, blow away much of the litter of a technological and mechanical world, and to revitalize the mind through direct contact and interaction through the one of the senses with nature.

Part of the problem for art teachers when *natural sensory input* becomes less important than *constructed sensory input* is that the impact that technology, particularly in professional entertainment and advertising mediums has upon students, can be extremely severe. Sometimes, the influence on the creative impulses, or lack of them, which are displayed in some

students, is enormous. For some, the influence is so positive and strong they wish to just produce images like those they see and admire in the media. This is true not only in terms of *kinds of art works produced*, but also in *kinds of aesthetics appreciated*.

An obvious example of this, of course, can be seen in the use of 'Manga-style images that appeal to many students today. Rather than treat this interest as something that is negative, teachers might be better placed if they showed students how to use and adapt that style in a more creative and imaginative way that takes them 'away from' simple copying, plagiarizing and making work that is clearly derivative. Surely, style isn't the issue! There's nothing wrong with students having a favored style. They all do – as do we. And, it's part of our responsibility to ensure they do have personal preferences and know why they like the things they like! I know I have a favored style. My favored style and aesthetic is 'anything that challenges me and my thinking' – that is different to what I'm accustomed to. I love to be challenged. Maybe the problem with Manga style is with us because '*we don't like the style!* That's really beside the point and is just a '*taste issue.*' Maybe we need to learn to appreciate the style and its own aesthetics, or we'll get left behind and become redundant like those who didn't like Modernist styles...or computers!

Similar issues arise with Street Art including Graffiti, which, apart from issues about legality with some works, faces hurdles with some teachers who cannot relate to a different kind of aesthetic. Interestingly, I contend that artists such as Warhol (who had an enormous influence on the Art scene and style and appealed to the senses in a simplistic way, but was not a 'great artist' by any definition of the term) would love the works, including the aesthetics, of many street art forms, and especially those of artists such as Blek le Rat and Banksy

who took his simplistic linear forms with simple colors inside the lines and gave them stronger messages with political and social messages and meanings. I think that once there are 'big, glossy books' about your work in the bookshop of the National Gallery in London, you've made it. That applies to *Blek* and *Banksy* and *Warhol* and *Manga*! But, all of these works appeal to the senses in different ways to other more traditional forms and styles. Hence my comments on Warhol (please free to engage me on this topic in the space provided at the bottom of this file). I'm quite sure Warhol was taking 'the mickey' out of art and would be embarrassed by the prices we pay for his simplistic, commercial prints (I have one!) ...that was his point, exactly. If a student had first done what he did, they couldn't do well in IB or VCE or HSC or any other senior certificate. Have a look at how his work would 'stack up to the criteria' of your own senior examination system (by the way, nor would Picasso, or Braque or Matisse!).

Then there are those students who see what is done in movies, in computer animation and computer games, and who feel inadequate and incapable of expressing their ideas and feelings in pencil or paint or clay. To them, what they produce appears shoddy, amateurish, unprofessional, out of touch, lacking in a glossy and slick finish. Of course, in many schools computer graphics and the use of sophisticated computer or digital imagery provides the opportunity of allowing students to work in their own digital and computer-based world. The quality of much of the Digital photography and use of Adobe Photoshop in Australian schools is now extremely high, and in one IB school senior students even design and build their own computer games! The aesthetic of these is based clearly on a special appreciation of color that is derived through sensory perception of color relationships and form, and has direct affinity with *The Simpsons*, *Warhol* and *Commercial Advertising*. Now, what I'm saying here is that

it has its own validity and is based on a different reaction to the sense of color. A knowledge of the senses is important to all of us.

Regardless of whether students have been influenced by or against imagery created by their technological world, the need for increased sensory awareness is critical. Students need to understand *why the senses are important* and have their own sensory awareness *extended*. Do you realize (most student's don't unless they study biology) that sound that is 'too loud' damages the ears permanently! That's permanently! Get that, permanently? And, light that is too bright and too concentrated damages the sight permanently. That's why we are warned each time there is an eclipse of the Sun not to look directly at it. As art teachers, we have a responsibility to communicate those things, and the opportunity to make a difference to each student's capacity to experience life through the senses...and provide some really interesting and captivating activities that appeal to most adolescents.

Development and use of the senses is essential to a deeper awareness and appreciation of the world in which we exist. Much of our experience and understanding of that world is gained quite directly through a 'sensual relationship and interaction with the things that are near us. We often collect or surround ourselves with those 'sensual' things we like to feel, smell, taste and hear. We call some really special relationships 'sensuous' because they provoke 'special responses' to those things through or with another person. And, 'sensuous' always means appealing. It is something we value.

We learn to recognize and respond to the shape of a tree by looking; the peculiar fragrance of its blossom by smelling;

the rough or smooth texture of its bark by feeling; the flavor of its fruit by tasting and the sound of its leaves rustling in the wind by listening. Our full understanding of a tree doesn't happen with just one of those things. It can be summed up as-

Seeing + Smelling + Touching + Tasting + Listening = Tree

Although we can chose to focus on one individual sensation, e.g. the way a tree looks (for example when drawing it) a much greater appreciation for a tree's beauty and value will be gained by integrating combinations of all of the sensory characteristics available. We need to enjoy and appreciate the entire aesthetic and sensory experience of trees rather than just naming their parts or experiencing one aspect.

Awareness can be simply interpreted as the refined use of the senses. This in turn allows students to better perceive and understand information available in the environment and for much more detail than usual to be noticed. If teachers are to assist students in developing awareness then teachers themselves also need to be more open and attentive to their own experiences: to develop their own sensitivity, their own awareness.

The development of greater awareness need not always involve direct and conscious dissecting of everything with which students come in contact. They are capable of absorbing large amounts of 'raw material' which later they can process in various ways including during creative expression. Students should not be told to see, smell, feel, hear and taste everything that comes their way but need to be encouraged to take a little more time to perceive their environment in their own way. But, they do need to be made aware of the many

interesting and enjoyable things that are easy to miss. And, one of the ways they can develop an interest in use of the senses is through interesting and valuable class room activities that both encourage and require them to pay attention to sensory experiences. In time, exercising their senses in formal class time will encourage them to discover things themselves.

Because students learn so much through sensual experience and because they learn so well through direct sensual contact with their environment, development of the senses should be considered an important component of educational programs. Activities that give students opportunities to develop and heighten their sensory awareness should be regularly provided by schools. Art programs have a special capacity to provide such activities.

If Art teachers ignore the important role the senses play in living and learning. Who else in the school is likely to address this essential area of development? Who else has the opportunity to address them so well?

So much of our modern technological knowledge and development is directed either to prolonging life or destroying it; but so little concern or attention is focused on trying to enhance it. The Arts (Visual and Performing) offer many opportunities, and sensual development in particular relies on the Arts which have an essential role to play.

Activities for this file can be found on Sensory Awareness Part 2 on this website (to be completed).

