"You Wish It Could Speak for Itself":
Examining the Use of Aesthetic Representation in an Elementary Teacher Preparation Program

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As I go over the syllabus on the first day of the semester, most under-graduate pre-service teachers listen quietly and occasionally take some notes. It seems business-as-usual until I get to the explanation of the final assignment—the aesthetic representation. I see a range of reactions on my university students' faces as I explain that the final project will be an aesthetic representation of literacy.

The incorporation of the arts into any classroom can be a valuable way to go beyond traditional, linguistic-based instruction and to create multiple connections across academic disciplines (Eisner, 1997; Folsom, 2005). Artistic endeavors used to be quite common—and, at times, are still seen—in the elementary classroom. Ideally, teachers ask students to respond to literature in a variety of forms (e.g., drawing or painting favorite parts of stories, creating shoebox dioramas, responding to literature through poetry, dramatizing literature through Readers Theater). When reading children's books such as *Green Eggs and Ham* (Suess, 1988) or *Stone Soup* (Brown, 1997), teachers may engage in the culinary arts with their students by preparing dishes related to the story. Unfortunately in today's educational climate, these opportunities involving

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the use of art in the classroom are increasingly seen as immaterial or as a luxury that schools can no longer afford in an ever-growing push for meeting academic standards.

These criticisms fail to recognize that the incorporation of the arts in the classroom not only feeds creative thinking, but also promotes academic rigor (Eisner, 1997). Artistic endeavors are critical for students to express learning and understandings of literacy. In that regard, it is essential that pre-service teachers engage in and comprehend how to incorporate the arts into their educational practices. As the current educational climate often does not support this integration of arts into the curriculum, pre-service teachers are often not provided with opportunities in their field work to experience arts-based means to express academic understandings, such as *aesthetic representations* (the focus of this article). The responsibility becomes that of the pre-service teacher preparation program to expose students to the process, thereby modeling the importance of fostering creative thinking and allowing students to use a variety of learning styles to express understanding. By emphasizing the role of the arts in elementary teacher preparation programs, future teachers are introduced to a critical avenue that allows students to acquire a more in-depth relationship to the academic content, to strengthen comprehension, and to experience the arts integrated into the curriculum (Eisner, 1997).

This article explores a group of six pre-service teachers' expressions of literacy through aesthetic representations. First, we provide a brief review of the most pertinent literature regarding how literacy and the arts have been linked in educational studies. Second, we provide an overview of our study. Next, we describe three themes that emerged from the data: (1) connections to literacy through aesthetic representations, (2) the process that pre-service teachers went through in order to create their aesthetic representations, and (3) how the aesthetic representations informed their own professional practice. Lastly, we discuss how using aesthetic representations in the classroom has enriched understandings and expressions of literacy while allowing us, as university professors, to differentiate for individual students' needs, strengths, and interests. Implications will be addressed in relation to both teacher education and elementary education practices.

Literature Review: Ways of Knowing and Understanding

In her study of four pre-service teachers and their reflection process, Ostorga (2006) concluded that critical, reflective thinking "cannot be taught through a few simple techniques but requires education that transforms the preservice teachers' ways of knowing" (p.19). Short, Kauff-

man, and Kahn (2000) also discuss the importance of having students' learning experiences incorporate "multiple ways of knowing—the ways in which humans share and make meaning, specifically through music, art, mathematics, drama, and language" (p. 160). Just as there are multiple ways of knowing, students best demonstrate this learning in many different ways (Tomlinson, 1999). Students learn best when a variety of strategies are used that tap into their Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1999), funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; González et al., 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), interest areas, and learning styles (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers who acknowledge and actively engage these various ways of knowing tend to differentiate their teaching and their classroom environments. Tomlinson (1999) identifies three areas in which teachers may differentiate instruction: content, process, and product. By inviting students to use aesthetics as a means to express their connections to academic content, each of their processes and, ultimately, their products are as different as the individuals who create them.

Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) underscore the benefits of incorporating multiple ways of knowing in relation to student motivation. Students not only seem to be motivated by the use of art, but often feel less threatened due to the fact that the fear of failure may be minimized (Dean & Gross, 1992). Beyond differentiation and motivation, another reason to include aesthetics in our teaching practice is to build strong academic connections and cognitive learning (Folsom, 2005). Academic learning can be increased with hands-on experiences of art. Eisner (1997) claims that there is a two-fold aim in education for students to be both well-informed and critical thinkers:

> We would like our children to be well informed—that is, to understand ideas that are important, useful, beautiful, and powerful. And we also want them to have the appetite and ability to think analytically and critically, to be able to speculate and imagine, to see connections among ideas, and to be able to use what they know to enhance their own lives and to contribute to their culture. (p. 349)

Through the development of aesthetic representations, students understand that their ideas are both important and powerful. Additionally, they see personal connections to literacy and begin to imagine and speculate beyond the given curriculum. Using aesthetic representations in connection with course content is clearly a way to incorporate more analytical and critical thinking into a teacher preparation program while, at the same time, differentiating methodology, motivating all learners, and reducing the element of failure.

Within this article, we specifically use the conceptualization of "aesthetic representations" which require pre-service teachers to engage in

a process that attends to both productive and responsive components. Kemple and Johnson (2002) explain that:

> the productive component corresponds to creative expression or the act of putting things (ideas, materials, sounds, etc.) together in a novel way that has personal meaning and personal purpose...The responsive component encompasses appreciation of natural beauty, appreciation of the arts, and forming judgments and preferences concerning aesthetic productions. (p.211)

Through productive and responsive components, students engage in creation and judgment—the two highest levels in the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This alignment supports Eisner's (1997) notion that using aesthetic representation adds the academic and cognitive rigor we desire for our students. Drawing upon this framework, we include the use of aesthetic representations in our university literacy courses.

Although research studies with pre-service teachers that specifically explore the use of aesthetic representations of knowledge are lacking (Cuero et al., 2008), a number have documented the importance of incorporating innovative and non-traditional projects in teacher preparation programs. For example, Donnelly (2005) conducted a study on using teaching portfolios—which have been around for years—to facilitate and guide peer interviews. In reference to technological innovations, extending teaching portfolios to encompass multimedia aspects provides an option for performance-based assessment to evaluate pre-service teachers' experiences (Bartlett, 2002; Smith et al., 2001). In Albers' research (1997), she challenges educators to consider the meaning-making potential of art, stating that "many of [students'] courses rely on single, decontextualized responses to content, many students find it difficult to examine, interrogate, critique, and articulate the very constructs they use to create their meaning" (p. 344). All of these studies highlight the need to go beyond traditional assessments in order to allow pre-service and in-service teachers to deepen their understandings of content and practice.

Context of the Study

As teacher educators, we had been using aesthetic representations in our courses to challenge pre-service teachers to express their connections to course content using non-traditional means. In addition to using more traditional types of assessment (e.g., tests, essay papers, reflective journals), we have observed that the use of aesthetic representations forces pre-service teachers to think about the content and their con-

nections to it in a new way—a non-linear way that engages complex thinking and creativity.

Given that we (the authors/researchers) were the only tenure-track professors at a large Hispanic-serving university in the Southwest who had made a curricular commitment to using aesthetic representations in the majority of our courses, we periodically discussed how to best explain, guide, and assess our students in creating them. In a discussion that took place at the beginning of Fall 2006, Crim mentioned that some of her students had discussed creating aesthetic representations in the previous semester with Cuero. We realized that we had a unique opportunity to conduct a qualitative study that would allow us to explore students' experiences of creating aesthetic representations the previous semester (involving archival data collection) and the current semester. Therefore, our participants come from a purposeful sampling pool (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998) that met the following criteria:

> • were enrolled in a course entitled *Reading Comprehension* in the Spring 2006 semester which focused on identifying and developing strategies for reading comprehension at the elementary school level,

> • were simultaneously enrolled in paired courses entitled *Literacy Problems* (which required our university students to assess reading levels and work with individual elementary students who were struggling with literacy) and *Approaches to Teaching Social Studies, Language Arts, and Fine Arts* in the Fall 2006 semester, and

> • had created an aesthetic representation as the culminating event of each semester.

Of the twenty students enrolled in the Fall 2006 paired courses, seven pre-service teachers met the criteria and initially agreed to participate in the study. However, only six were able to participate, because one student, Dianira (pseudonyms used), went overseas due to military obligations. All members of the final group were U.S.-born and consisted of:

> • Cassandra, Estela, Leticia who were Latinas;

> • Leslie and Margaret who were Caucasians; and

> • Jaime who had a Caucasian mother and a Panamanian father.

With the remaining six subjects, we collected and analyzed data from archival on-line and in-class reflections from both semesters, digital pictures of aesthetic representations, video-taped presentations from the Fall 2006 semester, and a focus-group interview. For this article, we focus our attention on aesthetic representations of literacy to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers describe their connections to literacy through aesthetic representations?

2. How do pre-service teachers describe the process they underwent in creating their aesthetic representations?

We used open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to identify themes that we later collapsed and combined into the following: (1) the wide array of imagery that sought to represent the complexities of the literacy process, (2) a behind the scenes look at the artistic process, and (3) how the aesthetic representations informed pedagogical practice.

Findings

Three themes emerged during our exploration of the six women's understandings of and connections to literacy. The first theme deals with the wide array of imagery that sought to represent the complexities of the literacy process. The second theme delves into the processes that they describe going through as a result of having to envision and create aesthetic representations tied to literacy for two consecutive semesters. The final theme for this article describes how these teachers used or planned to use aesthetic representations with elementary students.

Representing Complexities:
The Literacy Process through Imagery

All six teachers used imagery in their twelve aesthetic representations in their pursuit to capture the intricate and complex nature of the literacy process. Here we describe three diverse uses of imagery that touched upon the transformational and multi-dimensional aspects of literacy learning: (a) opaque to transparent, (2) darkness to light, and (3) whole greater than the parts.

Figure 1.
Jewelry by Leticia, Fall 2006.

Opaque to transparent. One way that pre-service teachers used imagery was to illustrate how readers must be continually and actively engaged in the process of making meaning from texts. Otherwise, comprehension may be jeopardized. Leticia and Margaret aesthetically and verbally expressed this notion through the employment of opaque and transparent images. Opaque imagery was used to symbolize the incomprehensibility of text passages for a reader who may not have strategies for constructing meaning from text. By contrast, Leticia and Margaret used transparent imagery to symbolize a reader capable of drawing on strategies for reading comprehension.

During the focus group discussion, Leticia spoke about how she connected her jewelry-making (see Figure 1) to her own literacy, "I made a necklace and related it to my personal literacy problems, because I did have problems in reading... comprehension was the biggest thing" (interview, 12/06). Leticia went on to explain that the beads in the necklace gradually progress from opaque to more transparent to symbolize not only her long-standing struggles with literacy comprehension, but also the increasing number of strategies that she had developed in order to comprehend more fully: "Like I have to read it over and over or take little notes on the side of things that I need to remember" (interview, 12/06). She was careful to point out that the final bead—although the largest and most transparent of the lot—was not completely clear in recognition of the fact that literacy comprehension is an ongoing process of understanding: "My bottom bead … was clear, but it still is like broken up - you can't really see through it…. because I still today have a problem reading for content" (interview, 12/06).

Similarly, Margaret "focused on the problem I had with literacy which is reading comprehension. In middle and high school, I had a hard time understanding" (interview, 12/06). Margaret also portrayed her continued on-going struggles with literacy comprehension through the use of opaque and transparent images. Margaret's aesthetic representation consisted of two contrasting canvases. On both Margaret enlarged "a random text [passage] from—like—a college textbook of something I normally wouldn't understand" (interview, 12/06). On the first canvas, she "covered [the text passage] with tissue paper to make it kind of blurry to represent that I really didn't get it." However, the text passage on the second canvas appeared crisp and in focus, because "I had the same text [passage] but no tissue paper over it" (interview, 12/06). Margaret scattered various images throughout the text passage "to represent reading strategies that I learned in the past couple of years" in university courses related to literacy, such as accessing prior knowledge, outlining key concepts, and taking notes. In reference to applying explicit reading strategies with elementary school

children, Margaret asserted, "I want to teach all kinds of strategies to my students, because it's a shame that my [K-12] teachers never taught me this, because it's really made a world of difference" (interview, 12/06). Margaret aesthetically connected her past problems with literacy learning to her first canvas. The second canvas, on the other hand, showed a brighter, in-focus future in relation to her own reading comprehension and that of her future elementary school students.

   Darkness to light. Estela was able to use the vivid imagery of darkness and light to parallel the level of comprehension experienced by early and experienced readers. Estela had another way of using imagery to convey the transformative nature of literacy acquisition. During the Spring semester, Estela's aesthetic representation was comprised of two photographs (see Figures 2 and 3) that she took of her young nephew with a book and her sister reading a novel. After she took the photo-

Figure 2. My Wonderland Come to Life (Part 1) by Estela, Spring 2006.

Figure 3. My Wonderland Come to Life (Part 2) by Estela, Spring 2006.

graphs, she manipulated them using the computer application Microsoft Photoshop®. She explained, "I've thought about contrast between light and dark, color and non-color, real life and make believe. As I go along I make changes in what I think explains reading comprehension best" (in-class written reflection, 4/26/06). While several contrasting metaphors were present in the photographs, the elements of darkness and light seemed to be the most salient:

> Last semester, I did two different PhotoShop printouts where I took photos of just a background image. And I had cutouts of different characters from different stories. But the images were different, because one was darker. The image of the child reading in the dark and the characters on the picture were from early childhood books. And that was dark, because that child was kind of 'in the dark' about reading and didn't really understand what he was looking at. He was probably just reading pictures mostly. And the second picture had the element of light. So it was brighter and had more characters from harder reading books. And it had a person with an open book reading the story. And that showed how the older person understood what they were reading better. And how they were able to read stories with—more—harder vocabulary words and had a better comprehension about what they were reading… (interview, 12/06)

From our perspective, the lighter image contains colorful, moving characters that leap from the pages of the book and engage with the surroundings as the older reader brings them to life through comprehension. In the darker image, however, the characters from the book are almost see-through and less animated, because the young reader's comprehension level keeps him somewhat "in the dark."

Figure 4.
Trashcan by Jaime,
Spring 2006.

*Figure 5.
Trashcan
by Jaime,
Spring 2006.*

Whole greater than the parts. Many of the students indicated that a reader is more than a sum of decontextualized literacy skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, decoding, etc.). Therefore, another use of imagery was the idea that many factors come together to ultimately form the whole—ideally a literate being capable of reading both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1998). Margaret's fudge is an excellent illustration of "reading the word," because it symbolized the many subsets of literacy skills needed in order to read text. Jaime's urban sculpture, on the other hand, symbolized not only the experiential but also the socio-cultural, -political, and -historical factors that impact a reader's ability to "read the world."

Margaret described how her early literacy instruction followed an extremely prescribed and sequential formula that treated reading as a formula which she represented by making fudge:

> Last semester, I made fudge. What I did—Well, early on, I pretty much thought we had to make [the aesthetic representation] connected to the steps of the reading process. I chose to make fudge because you have to bake it in a certain order with certain ingredients. And you have to put certain ingredients in before you can bring in the others. And I connected it to literacy because I kind of learned to read that way. It seems that I learned that way: like I learned all my letters, and then I learned all my sounds, and then I learned all the letters in order, and then you can start reading. And that was the way I learned to read from what I can remember, but then I said, 'Well, when I'm a teacher, kids really don't have to learn this way. They can learn things out of order. They can learn the letters in different orders. They can know some of

their sounds before they recognize some of their letters. And they start
reading before they know all their sounds and all that good stuff.' So I
made fudge representing how *I* learned to read, but then I said, 'Too bad
I didn't bring up something like a Chex® mix, because you just throw
it all in. It doesn't have to be in some order.' (interview, 12/06)

Margaret's realization that early literacy instruction does not have to
be so prescribed seemed to crystallize on the day that she presented
the fudge to the class. Her explanation sparked a rich discussion about
how, as teachers, we need to be observant and flexible in meeting the
needs of our students. As opposed to one-size-fits-all literacy instruc-
tion, teachers should look at the benefits of differentiating instruction
with focused mini-lessons and the inclusion of high-interest texts on
students' reading levels.

Jaime's first aesthetic representation (see Figures 4 and 5) was
multi-layered and complex which she likened to the process of reading
comprehension:

I brought in a trash can and got plexiglass and made the different layers
within the trash can. Then did a collage…I associated with the things
that as a student and as a person developing reading comprehension
that I would be a completely different person because a lot of the things
that made me who I am today I obtained from reading, like going on
the internet and finding this and that. And if I had never developed
a strong sense of reading comprehension, then those are the aspects
of my life that I would have thrown away; they would have not been
around. (interview, 12/06)

Jaime's urban sculpture contained much symbolism which caused her
to lament, "You wish it could speak for itself" (interview, 12/06). Some
of the symbolism was: the eyes drawn on the outside of the trashcan
represented what is socially acceptable in society, which influences how
readers interpret texts; the collage on the inside walls of the trashcan
symbolized her personal values, beliefs, and experiences, like why she
was a vegan and why she wanted to make a difference in schools serving
students from working-class backgrounds; and the many tiers of Plexiglas
shelves containing mostly photographs and school supplies projected a
future vision of her future classroom; and the trashcan lid, which had
the lyrics of a song she wrote while mourning the death of two friends
was used to show the emotional and personal power of written texts.

Behind the Scenes: The Process
Through discussions and reflections, the students described many
aspects of the process they encountered when envisioning and creating
an aesthetic representation connected to literacy. This theme, seen con-

sistently in the findings, reinforces the importance of the process that they engaged in while creating their aesthetic representations. Given that all the students in our study approached their aesthetic representations from different perspectives and drew upon a vast range of experiences, no two individuals went through a lock-step process. However, there were certain phases that appeared across participants. We noticed three broad phases within the process: freaking out, finding inspiration, and reflecting. It should be mentioned that these three phases do not occur in isolation and may not be experienced to the same degree by everyone.

Freaking out. Unlike Estela, who immediately embraced aesthetic representation, most pre-service teachers described having many reservations in relation to this assignment. For instance, Jamie bluntly reflected, "I was freaked out the first time…curious about what everyone else would bring. And if what I was making would be as good as ….[others]. And would it make as much sense as everyone else was doing…This [2nd] semester I was a little more relaxed..." (interview, 12/06). In the following excerpt from an on-line posting to the class, Jaime animatedly conveyed her anxious frame of mind as she was in the midst of creating her first aesthetic representation:

> ...Soo…I have been freaking out about this whole "aesthetic representation" thing that we have to present in class next week….anyways…who is going next week??? Well, if I can get my hands on clay and a kiln to fire the clay in…..I am usually o.k. with "art"…especially having to present it to a group of people…..I don't know about the rest of you but, I'm a bit nervous. Anyways…I finally came up with a plan and started working on it. I went to home depot to get my supplies which included a big stainless steel trash can, plexy-glass, and a box cutter. The people at home depot told me that I could cut the glass with the box cutter……but when I got home….I quickly found out that trying to cut a big circle out of plexy-glass, using a box cutter was crazy!! I spent almost 45 minuets in the garage and was left with chicken scratch!! It was so frustrating! So, I headed back to Home Depot to get a saw! Hehehe…who thought that I would end up with an electric saw for this class……Anyways…[the post goes on to explain Jaime's project] (as written in the original, on-line posting, 4/06)

As evidenced in the above excerpt, Jaime requested support from her classmates and to share in the process which often proved to be an on-going challenge—sometimes frustrating, sometimes difficult, and sometimes humorous.

Others undoubtedly felt this frustration and stress. Many students did not hesitate to express that they were not comfortable approaching and then working through this process. Margaret alluded to her uneasiness

by stating, "I racked my brain for different ways to connect my experiences to [reading] comprehension" (email correspondence, 12/06). Leslie reflected on the many thoughts that came to mind when she first heard about the assignment: "It was kind of scary. I didn't know what to do. 'I don't get it. What do you mean? Why can't we do a test?'" (interview, 12/06). Margaret and, especially, Leslie's comments show that this type of assignment pushed them to a point of critical thinking that most tests do not reach. The fact that Leslie and other students would prefer a test underscores the test-minded environment that is all-too-prevalent in education. Fortunately, most students ultimately rose to the challenge by seeking inspiration and digging deeply and analytically.

Finding inspiration. Numerous comments referred to how they consciously, and sometimes subconsciously, added depth or shifted focus while developing their aesthetic representations. Therefore, another phase that we noted as they engaged in the process was that of finding inspiration where students demonstrated the development of critical and analytical thinking skills. In order to ground this rather abstract notion of finding inspiration, we draw attention to two people in particular. With the first example, we show how Leticia's topic shifted in mid-semester due to a specific event that impacted her and her family which caused her to re-evaluate her approach. We then use Cassandra's experience of how she consciously chose a more personal approach with her second aesthetic representation after noticing that her first was much more "global" in nature.

After beginning the process of creating her first aesthetic representation, Leticia shared that she reached a point where she felt she needed to change directions:

> I had started out with a different topic for my aesthetic representation but with the recent death in my family I decided to shift focus on family...I decided I would make my aesthetic representation a tribute to those who have left a lasting mark on my learning. (in-class written reflection, 4/26/06)

Leticia's piece entitled *Learning through Family* "was a canvas and I did decoupage. And I took colorful napkins and scrunched them up and put them on the background" (interview, 12/06).

In essence, Leticia approached the assignment as an opportunity to focus on how her non-traditional family had impacted her literacy learning. Therefore, she decoupaged several significant items in a collage-type format, such as a poem that reminded her of her father's ex-wife, a newspaper article about migrant farmworking, and book covers from her favorite novels. For example, *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz

Ryan (2000) is about a girl who worked as a migrant farmworker after emigrating from Mexico to the United States. The following excerpt demonstrates how Leticia's family served as muse for the selected items:

> …I printed out a poem—well, it's a long story. My father's ex-wife would read to me all the time…I come from a mine-yours-and-ours family; that's what we call ourselves. Both my parents are divorced. They each had children when they got married. And then they had me and my little brother. And I grew up with two of my half-brothers, me, and my little brother. And I had three older sisters from my dad…They were my babysitters and I was always at their house. I would spend a lot of time with [my dad's ex-wife's family]. So I guess you could say that we were a close-knit family…I also had a picture of Esperanza Rising because I had never read anything that culturally I could relate to. And a lot of the stories that [the book] would talk about, my mom would tell me stories about her family going to the fields and picking the fruits and picking the cotton and all that sort of stuff. And I was like, 'Oh my God! There's somebody who actually writes about this!' I had heard it from my mom, but I didn't believe her. But then I could actually read it in a book. (interview, 12/06)

Cassandra's first aesthetic representation, entitled "The View Through My Eyes," (see Figures 6 and 7) consisted of "like the world map, but instead of the world map it was pictures of people cut out" (interview, 12/06). She made the bodies of water with "a background of words that impacted a lot of students…words that are powerful…like *divorce, war, poverty*…." (interview, 12/06). In addition to the meticulously cut-out continents of black-and-white photographs and the sea of words that she designed on her computer, Cassandra adhered various multi-colored

Figure 6.
The View Through My Eyes (detail)
by Cassandra,
Spring 2006.
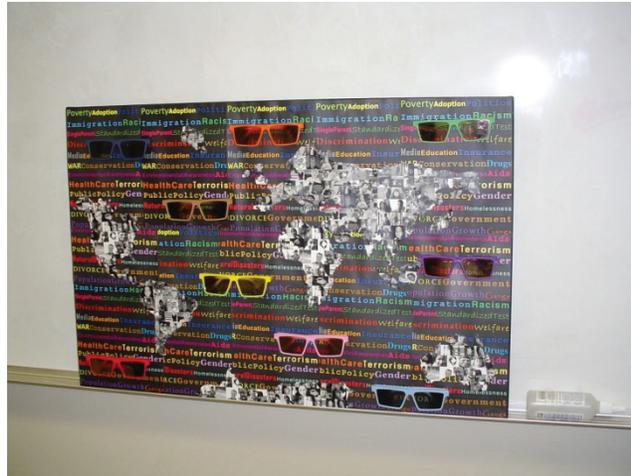
*Figure 7.
The View
Through My
Eyes
by Cassandra,
Spring 2006.*

plastic sunglasses to the canvas to represent "different colored lenses...
[because] everybody sees the world differently." She added, "The color
of my lens is not the same as the person next to me" (interview 12/06).
In tying her representation to reading comprehension, she went on to
emphasize the importance of including, fostering, and validating multiple
perspectives in the classroom in order to enrich the prior knowledge,
experiences, and values of our diverse student population. For example,
teachers should incorporate literature representing diverse perspectives
for activities and their classroom libraries. As illustrated with the many
colors of sunglasses, teachers should also be aware that backgrounds
and experiences may shade interpretations differently even though a
single piece of literature is being discussed.

While Cassandra's first piece took a more "global approach" toward
Reading Comprehension, her second piece (see Figure 8) related to *Lit-
eracy Problems* was more personal in nature: "This semester I took a
more personal approach....It was like puzzle pieces [representing] family
environment of the home" (interview 12/06). Her aesthetic representa-
tion was painted on four separate canvases. When the canvases were
placed in a two-by-two formation, they came together in the shape of a
house. As Cassandra contemplated how her home experiences impacted
her literacy learning, she explained, "I'm from a home—I wouldn't say
broken, but *divided*. I have pieces of me here and there." She went on
to explain her experiences with literacy in relation to her home life and
how the different environments fostered diverse emphases on learning
and literacy. Through exploring her personal growth, she identified how
her own lens was developed.

Figure 8.
Four Canvases
by Cassandra,
Fall 2006.

Reflecting. While working through their initial apprehensions and sharing their work, the students had an opportunity to gain confidence and insight into a relatively new and unfamiliar process. The second semester, the six participants approached this assignment with new-found confidence and insights. They seemed to feel that their prior experience let them in on a "secret" that revealed their understanding of literacy with an aesthetic representation. For example, Estela recognized that she was able not only to tap into her creativity, but also draw upon her visual learning modality which she identified as her area of strength. Early on, Estela reflected, "I'm enjoying the process because it gives me a lot of freedom of expression. It also helps me to consider reading in a new form" (in-class written reflection, 4/26/06). She insightfully told the group,

> I like the fact that I can do an aesthetic representation because I think I'm a better visual learner. I was going into graphic design and all of our finals were a product that we had to create. So, I'm probably better at that than an actual test. So the students—who are more visual or who want to be more creative and have their own ideas—can shine. (interview, 12/06)

Estela's comments highlight some of the pedagogical benefits of incorporating aesthetic representations in the classroom, such as bringing in and strengthening multiple modalities (i.e., auditory, kinesthetic, visual), activating prior knowledge (e.g., background in graphic design), and fostering creative, critical, and analytical thinking.

Furthermore, most of the students noted that their stress seemed to

be markedly less intense when approaching this assignment for the second time. Some of the participants even found themselves placed in a position as resident experts for their classmates who had never heard of—let alone created—an aesthetic representation before. Margaret reflected that one of her classmates called her freaking out. Margaret offhandedly added that the classmate's state of mind "sounded just like me last semester. She was like, 'I think I'm just going to represent the steps of the reading process.' I'm like, 'It sounds exactly like the way I was.'" (interview, 12/06). Margaret's experience spurred similar recollections from the group:

> Cassandra: Yeah, it's true. Because I remember Renee, did you hear when she raised her hand? She was like, "What is an aesthetic?"
>
> Multiple voices: Yeah. Yeah. [laughter]
>
> Cassandra: I remember thinking that last semester.
>
> Cuero: What did you say?
>
> Cassandra: Well, I don't remember who answered, but it was like, "It's a form of expression relating to the course."
>
> Cuero: Does anyone else remember comments from the class?
>
> Leslie: They were curious, like [lowering her voice] "What did *you* guys do? What is this? What's the secret?"
>
> Cassandra: Yeah, the secret! [Everyone explodes with laughter.]
>
> Cuero: The Dead Poets Society here.
>
> Jamie: [in a jokingly ominous tone] "Come to an elite club." (interview, 12/06)

The general feeling seemed to be that once they experienced the process of creating an aesthetic representation, they were more comfortable with the assignment. They tended to be more open to the process and even stepped into leadership roles with their peers.

Informing Classroom Practice
through Aesthetic Representations

Beyond making connections to their own literacy learning and the literacy process in a general sense, several of the students made direct parallels between creating the aesthetic representation and literacy acquisition for young children. For the final theme, we discuss how engaging in the process informed the pre-service teachers' pedagogical practice both at the time of the study and for the future. As examples of how the aesthetic representations informed pedagogical practice, we provide information regarding Jaime, Leslie, and Margaret's pieces.

After a box cutter failed to cut the Plexiglas for her first aesthetic representation, Jaime returned to Home Depot to buy an electric saw. The following excerpt provides a window into how the process of creating her piece actually helped to clarify and deepen her understanding of young children's literacy learning:

> Anyways….when I got the saw home I tried to read the directions…. let me just tell you……I read three sentences and I was done!!! I had no idea what was going on or what was needed to screw in where….. or what part they were even talking about. So, I ditched the directions and figured out how to use the saw myself. I'm sure that was not the smartest thing to do…but hey…I still have all my fingers! This experience reminded me of the lecture we had in class about reading comprehension for kiddos can be really frustrating if they can not read nearly 95% of the words on the page. Unfortunately, for the kids who are not "good" readers, they many times do not have an actual concrete object to fall back on… (the saw)…for younger kids…the pictures seem to be the only clues they have to understand what the story is about…but for older kids who are reading chapter books, there are not to many pictures to help them out. This experience also made me realize how important background information and prior knowledge is. If I had prior experience with electric tools, I might have run into some of the words and phrases they used in the manual…..but since I have never really used electric tools…I was clueless!! (as written in the original, on-line posting, 4/06)

For her second aesthetic representation (see Figure 9), a clay figure of a man stood in the center and on top of a scattered clutter of ripped-out

Figure 9. Dictionary drawings with Blank man by Jamie, Fall 2006

and drawn-on dictionary pages. For the drawings (see Figure 10), Jamie chose to collaborate with a handful of co-artists who were elementary students from the school where her field experience took place. Jaime explained:

> I used a shower curtain with dictionary pages. And I glued them to the shower curtain and had the kids go in and find words they knew off the pages and draw pictures…I brought in a man (see Figure 9) I'd made awhile ago out of clay …and he was all blank and whatever… and I made the connection with, you know, that we were tutoring kids one-on-one. We had this great responsibility, because—you know—we were shaping who they were going to be eventually—as they are grown ups. And how if we don't connect them to literature…, they are going to eventually grow up and be unconnected to the things around them and how that was going to affect society. (interview, 12/06)

Besides involving her students in the development of her piece, she poignantly touched on the great responsibilities we share as teachers of young children for fostering authentic and meaningful contexts for learning.

Much like Jaime, Leslie chose to make something that she could physically use in her future classroom for her first piece (see Figure 11). Leslie's piece, which consisted of three decoupaged wooden boxes with covers of various children's books, set off the following conversation:

> Leslie: Last semester, I made some boxes—three different sized boxes.

> Multiple voices: Oh, yeah!

> Cuero: That everyone wanted to buy from you. Everyone was like, "How much?"

Figure 10.
Dictionary drawings
(detail)
by Jamie,
Fall 2006.

Jaime: They were decoupage boxes. They were so awesome.

Leslie: …I got book covers from a [elementary school] librarian. And she sent out an email to other librarians to get me these book covers. So I had all these book covers and I decoupaged them on these boxes. And they can hold books for like classrooms.

Besides having a practical application (i.e., to hold books in her future classroom), the boxes forced Leslie to network with important individuals in the schools (i.e., librarian) and to survey elementary students (i.e., Leslie's elementary-aged daughter and her friends) to decide which book covers to use. Leslie emphasized that many titles suggested by the young girls exemplified that all learners will have different interests and needs in their literacy development of which teachers need to be aware. Since Leslie is a self-proclaimed visual learner, she explained that book covers were what "hooked" her into reading and ultimately helped build her reading comprehension.

Leslie articulated how an elementary student inspired her second aesthetic representation (see Figure 12):

Well, I really wanted to include something from my tutoring student. She has many literacy problems and trying to figure out how I can help her was an issue for me. So, I wanted her to be a part of my aesthetic this time around. (interview, 12/06)

Leslie's student's frustration with her own literacy development was evident in her overworn and damaged erasers. Leslie kept these artifacts and used them to create the cover of a book. The inside pages that filled the book were compiled from her students' writing; representing her growing success.

Figure 11.
Decoupage boxes by Leslie, Spring 2006.
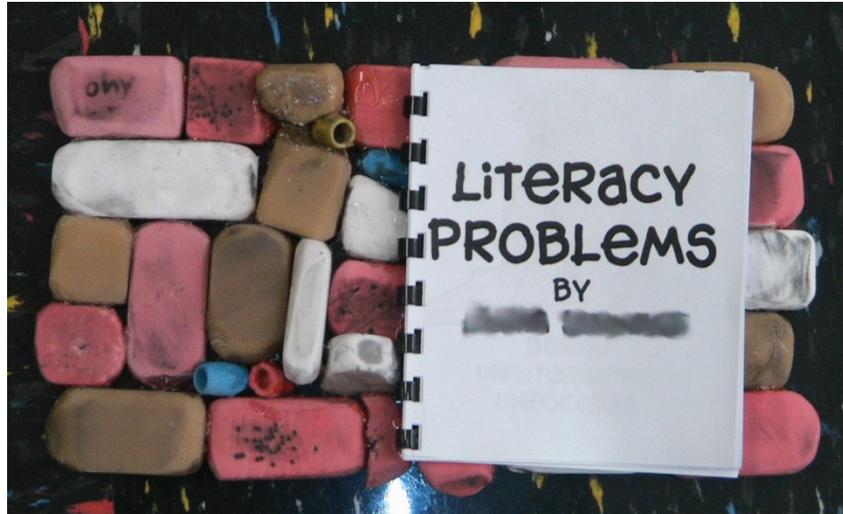
Figure 12.
Eraser book by Leslie, Fall 2006.

While some, like Jamie and Leslie, used their elementary students directly, or indirectly, in their aesthetic response, others, like Margaret, related to teaching practices gleaned from their own experience as an elementary school student. When responding in an email, she explains,

> Of course, my [aesthetic response] this time focuses on reading comprehension again, but instead of showing a step by step process of how I learned to read, I showed my difficulties with reading comprehension and what I do to overcome those difficulties, and how we as teachers should teach reading comprehension strategies—which is something I was NEVER taught in school. (interview, 12/06)

Margaret's link to her future role as an educator is pulled from her aesthetic response. Jamie, in the reflection above also inferred the great role of an educator as her "blank" man sat in the middle of her piece as she spoke to the responsibility teachers have to teach children about literacy. Jamie clearly internalized this responsibility not only to future students, but also to society.

Engagement in the process of creating the aesthetic representation brought clarity to the pre-service teachers and to us in relation to how these individuals connected to literacy. Additionally, it created a reflective lens into their own pedagogical beliefs. According to their reflections and insights, the participants aspire to foster creative, critical and analytical thinking within their future classrooms. These pre-service teachers are

taking the first step towards becoming extraordinary teachers who differentiate curriculum, instruction, and assessment for students through open-ended and holistic ways.

Final Thoughts

When faced with the assignment, many underestimated their ability to create something artistic. After critical reflection, however, they were able to take their connections to a deep level while drawing upon their individual strengths, personal experiences, and course content. For example, Estela commented that having the opportunity to use her background and interest in graphic design allowed her to make valuable connections to literacy. All participants conveyed a strong, unique voice as they presented their pieces to peers, reflected about the process, and participated in our focus-group interview.

By creating aesthetic representations, these teachers forged connections to literacy in particular and pedagogy in general. This was due, in great part, because they were challenged to reach the two highest levels of thinking based on the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy: *evaluate* and *create* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). One opportunity for higher-level thinking resulted from their personal explorations which created deep and textured connections to literacy, as demonstrated by how some students' reflected on and came to grips with their own struggles with literacy development as Leticia's necklace represented. Secondly, higher-level thinking was fostered through the social aspects of this process, such as on-line postings, class discussions, and the final presentations of the actual aesthetic representations. Their on-going evaluations were evident throughout the process, because they had to contemplate, analyze, and justify their connections and those of their peers. Finally, this process served as a model for creative and innovative projects that could be applied to additional pedagogical contexts. For example, some pre-service teachers, like Jaime and Leslie, based their aesthetic representations on their experiences with current elementary students. Others, like Margaret, discussed how their new-found understandings of literacy development would impact their future classrooms in a positive way.

Using aesthetic representations as a culminating assignment allowed pre-service teachers to demonstrate their knowledge and understandings of literacy in ways that go beyond simply regurgitating terms and concepts imposed upon them. They are challenged to *think*, as opposed to ventriloquize. Their reflections about the process support the importance of teacher educators to create more spaces for students to engage in unique and innovative opportunities to explore content

and pedagogy. As Eisner (1997) points out, this type of artistic endeavor has the potential for students to seek out the multi-dimensionality of content, take ownership of their ideas and connections, and recognize them as powerful.

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