My article in the last issue of *Teaching Theatre* presented a rationale for including aesthetics education in the theatre classroom. In this article, I will show how people learn aesthetics and some methods for teaching aesthetics in the context of theatre or drama, especially in the current era of educational reform.

The reform movement was launched by the approval of national standards for education in most disciplines, including theatre, in 1994, and catapulted to even higher prominence with the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002. Theatre games, Christmas plays, and annual musicals are all fine activities and respected traditions in theatre education, but where is the change that is implicit in reform? What accountability is there to a higher standard? Because philosophy is all about higher order thinking skills, aesthetic education can help take your theatre classes to a higher level of performance. Teachers who teach aesthetics or any other branch of philosophy generally report surprise at their students’ interest in and insight into challenging problems.

High expectations, of course, must be tempered by considerations of mental, social, and emotional growth that are best understood by classroom teachers who can assess their own students’ abilities. Knowledge acquisition is cumulative. What people understand about a work of art usually depends on prior experiences and expectations, which are then applied to new experiences. Using some of the strategies...
discussed later in this article, you can assess your students’ current level of aesthetic understanding and experience and then design lesson plans to lead them to the next level.

When theatre is an extra-curricular activity, it may be acceptable to plan a program full of activities without regard for growth except for that which occurs incidentally. But in the context of the school curriculum, theatre educators need to be able to demonstrate progress toward a more mature level of development.

**Cognitive developmental approach to aesthetics**

Do children hold early forms of aesthetic theories? Do they think in ways that differ from adult thinking, and that affect their ability to acquire aesthetic awareness?

A cognitive developmental approach to aesthetics supports the importance of aesthetics in arts instruction because it shows how an effective curriculum can help students progress through higher levels of cognitive development. Students can make better sense of their theatre experiences and can apply their understanding in making theatre themselves, leading to increasingly sophisticated work. Students need to begin thinking about their own theory of theatre, just as all teachers need to be able to articulate a philosophy of education. The idea is to engage the students with material that will stretch or provoke thinking. You have to start with students where they are, but they should not stay there.

Research into cognitive development shows that people learn not simply by receiving more and more information, but through developing the ability to place that information in a framework for organizing it, connecting it, extending it, interpreting it, and knowing when and how to apply and adapt it in practical situations. Aesthetics provides such a framework in arts education.

In his book *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Developmental Account of Aesthetic Experience*, Michael Parsons describes conversations about artworks with people of all ages, preschool through adult. His research focuses on aesthetic responses to works of art and the assumptions or latent theories behind those responses. By searching for patterns in these responses, Parsons discovered five stages through which most people progress as their aesthetic understanding matures, similar to Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development and Jean Piaget’s stages of intellectual development. He found that people progress through these stages according to their level of maturity, frequency and quality of experience with art over time, and the amount of interest and effort that people invest in studying art. Your job, as a theatre teacher, is to help students advance from their current stage of aesthetic development to the next level. Following is a brief summary of Parson’s cognitive development theory of aesthetic experience.

Preschoolers, being new to this world, revel in every sensory experience. Their stage one aesthetic thinking is spontaneous, non-judgmental, non-discriminatory, and highly personal. Judgment is simply a matter of liking something or not, with no awareness or care that others might feel differently. In stage two, elementary students become concerned with skill, realism, and beauty. They may recognize other viewpoints, but their basis for judgment is usually rooted in those core concepts. Unless they are developmentally disabled, most people will progress beyond the first stage, but many will stay at stage two through adulthood. As a result, high school and even university faculty will find many students solidly at stage two, so your challenge is to structure educational experiences that will lead to higher levels of aesthetic thinking.

During stage three, people become aware of the uniqueness of aesthetic experience and interested in the quality of that experience. Because the third stage typically emerges during adolescence, I will dwell on it a bit more. At this level, beauty and realism become subservient to expressiveness. Formerly rigid criteria for judgment (“a real person wouldn’t act like that”) now yield to a more subjective axiom, “people have the right to their own opinions.” However, this maturing individual recognizes that opinions, although we all have them, also have the ability to influence what other people think. During stage three, people also become aware of the aesthetic experience as something special about theatre. Sports and theatre might both be entertaining, but theatre and the other performing arts offer something that cannot be obtained at a sporting event or television reruns. Entertainment is plentiful in our society, but stage three individuals will go to the theatre in search of that extra aesthetic dimension that distinguishes the performing arts from other pleasant pastimes.

In Parson’s model, stages four and five typically do not appear until adulthood, if ever. Stage four is more about style and form as an expression of a public tradition created by the responses of many people over time. At this level, people exhibit an increasingly sophisticated understanding of artwork as the embodiment of a culture, not just the expression of individual artists. Stage four requires an education in the arts and cultural history, which could be from formal instruction or informal, self-directed reading and observing. Stage five strikes a balance between personal and social judgment. These individuals will judge not only the artwork but also the cultural tradition from which it comes. There is an acute awareness of their own habits of thought regarding the arts, recognizing that interpretations and judgments are subject to change, so there is constant reevaluation and adjustment of the self. Judgment of the artwork, themselves, and society are all intertwined and interrelated. Like self-actualization, stage five aesthetic awareness is a lifelong journey that young learners can aspire to, but will not achieve under your watch.
Levels of instruction
We all know some people learn faster than others due to experience and natural ability, but according to Louis Lankford, author of Aesthetics: Issues and Inquiry, there are three levels of instruction for aesthetic education: foundations, vivid cases, and complex issues. Teachers should guide students through these levels in sequence, regardless of age. With careful planning by the teachers, these instructional levels will help guide students through their own levels of cognitive development in aesthetics.

Foundations level
Basic terms, concepts, and skills in theatre are prerequisite to an aesthetic education in theatre. Students cannot participate in meaningful discussion about aesthetic issues without some basic vocabulary, key concepts, and knowledge of a variety and range of works of theatre. For example, you could not discuss the interplay of artistic impulses among the creative team members working on a theatrical production if the class is uncertain about the roles of the playwright, director, actors, and designers.

I once taught theatre at a college in Jamaica where most of the drama majors had never seen or participated in a live performance other than short skits at school or church. They had seen American television and movies, so they thought it was a natural leap from acclaim in the church hall to wealth and fame in Hollywood. Everything in your college “Introduction to Theatre” course that would be obvious to most of us required careful, deliberate explanation to these anxious young people whose entire college education depended on a crash course in the foundations of theatre before they could do much of anything. The truth is that in all but the most affluent schools, many of your students are probably no different from mine in Jamaica, but fortunately you have more time and resources than I did in the underdeveloped Caribbean.

Students whose families take them to live performances from an early age will naturally feel more at ease with theatre in school, but for most students, you will need to provide as wide a range of exposure in class as possible. They should read plays, long and short, and see a wide variety of performances (live if possible, but if not, videotapes, DVDs, and television are a reasonable approximation, just as music teachers play recordings and art teachers show reproductions).

Students should also participate in a wide variety of performance activities: theatre games, improvisation, pantomime, puppetry, clowning, monologues, and scenes, both comedic and dramatic. They should perform material written by others and should write some themselves, either individually or collaboratively. With paper, pencil, and whatever inexpensive materials can be obtained, they should design and construct sets and costumes.

All along the way, you introduce essential terminology, major developments in theatre history, and the canon of dramatic literature. This should happen before high school, but because that seldom occurs to the extent desired, you may have to play catch-up. “Child play” is at the heart of all theatre, so I never look at any type of theatre as being too elementary for secondary students. After all, the highly imaginative use of puppets and effigies is what catapulted The Lion King to the top of the Broadway box office.

In high school, you can also introduce the foundations of aesthetics itself. My last article reviewed some of the basic terms and concepts, but you should supplement that cursory introduction with key concepts found in any college textbook on aesthetics, such as Marcia Muelder Eaton’s Basic Issues in Aesthetics. Eaton’s text, for instance, covers such topics as interpretation, criticism, and aesthetic response, the languages and contexts of art, and the nature of aesthetic value, which you can explore with secondary students. Expect that most of the examples in the textbooks will come from visual art, partly because it is so easy to include pictures of the artworks in question while not all readers will be familiar with specific examples from the performing arts.

However, once you understand the basic concepts, it is very easy to translate them with examples from theatre because most aesthetic concepts are truly cross-disciplinary. Questions about “artistic intention,” for example, are as relevant for playwriting as painting.

I do not recommend that you follow the tradition of university aesthetics courses by using readings from original sources such as Friedrich Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man or Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment. You can leave those for the philosophy majors.

Vivid cases level
With a good base in the foundations of theatre, students can then begin to directly address aesthetic issues. Vivid cases are questions, stories, and examples that grab attention and prompt inquiry about issues in theatre. For example, is Contact a musical? The entire show is danced and there is music throughout, yet nobody sings. Most of the music is well-known recorded classical music and jazz. If it is not a musical, then what is it? When nominating Tony Awards, is it fair to compare Contact with musicals that are composed especially for the stage and sung by live performers? This is a vivid case taken right out of the entertainment section of the newspaper, and young people are very concerned about fairness, so this is an issue many will seize upon.

(Contact did win the 2000 Tony for Best Musical, provoking much controversy and protests by traditionalist fans, composers, and musicians.)

An excellent resource for aesthetic education is Margaret Battin’s Puzzles About Art: An Aesthetic Casebook, widely used in both schools and universities. The book features more than a hundred case studies highlighting specific aesthetic issues from beauty and ugliness to the role of the arts in religion, history, politics, and the economy.

About a dozen of the cases are theatre-specific. Some are fairly lengthy and detailed, but here is one of the shorter cases from the chapter about creativity and fidelity: “Heinrich Gottfried Koch refused to give the role of Phaedra to a certain actress because he felt that she
had never experienced true love and thus would be incapable of rendering the part convincingly. W.H. Auden, on the other hand, argued that ‘if a man can be called to be an actor, then the only way he can be “true” to himself is by his “acting,” that is to say, pretense to be what he is not.’ Which, if either, of these views of performance in theatre is correct? Why?” This case touches upon an issue that continues to be debated by proponents of method acting and their detractors, and it is well worth exploring with your students.

At the Aesthetics Online website (www.aesthetics-online.org), Doug Arrell, a professor at the University of Winnipeg, offers several theatre case studies in an article titled “Teaching Aesthetics to Artists.” Consider this dilemma: “You are directing a play by a young male author. At the first rehearsal, an actress objects strongly to the way her character is portrayed. The character is a poorly educated, drug-addicted woman who accepts the fact that her boyfriend beats her, and even regards the beatings as signs of love. The actress argues that the portrayal condones violence towards women. The playwright insists vehemently that women like this exist, and that he must portray life truthfully. Should you ask the playwright to modify his play, or not?” This raises some provocative questions: what is “truth” in the creative world of theatre? What are the moral obligations of the playwright? Does immoral behavior on stage inspire immoral behavior by the audience? Arrell crafted this case as a fictitious model to illustrate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, but you can find real life parallels such as the 1961 hit musical Carnival, which is seldom performed today for reasons similar to those raised by this vivid case.

Puzzles About Art was published in 1989, but all of the issues remain relevant. Moreover, the arts are full of controversies and conundrums, so just follow the news and keep a file of clippings for use as vivid cases in your own classes. Like Doug Arrell, you can also write your own case studies, incorporating the aesthetic issues most relevant to your curriculum and adjusted for the maturity level of your students in terms of content and reading ability. Another way to create vivid cases is to juxtapose opposing views from your readings in theatre, such as the example above about Koch and Auden, creating forced-choice cases to stimulate discussion and provoke debate.

Complex issues level

As Lankford says, people can always add to their store of foundations as time goes by, and new vivid cases will emerge as new art and new controversies are created, but advanced students need to be able to address more complex issues.

One such issue that has made national headlines for many years is the question of whether taxpayers dollars should fund creation of the arts. When the budget is tight, which is always, how can one justify spending money on artworks that may prove to have little enduring value while people go homeless and hungry, our air and water is polluted, energy resources dwindle and costs skyrocket, and national security is threatened? In addition, some people believe that much of contemporary art threatens the moral character of their community and the very future of our civilization.

On the other hand, the leaders who initiated government programs to support the arts were concerned specifically with enhancing America’s cultural legacy so that we could stand as equals with our better-funded and artistically respected European competitors. Also, our constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression should assure support for both the mundane and the controversial. A proper examination of issues as complex as this requires participants who already know the foundations of the arts and can call upon vivid cases to support their argument.

Here is another complex issue, the relationship between theatre and any form of electronic or recorded media. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in theatre asked students to respond to scenes from old films in the public domain because there was simply no way for thousands of students across the country to witness the same live performance. This method was derided by theatre specialists as being untrue to the art form in question. However, in An Anatomy of Drama, the esteemed director and critic Martin Esslin referred repeatedly to the “basic unity” of theatre, film, television, and radio. In a clear, concise analysis, he outlined the essential elements of drama, focusing on drama as an act of communication, and showed how these elements are essential in all of these related media. Esslin even criticized “critics and academic teachers of drama” who doggedly support “tradition and lore” about the superiority of live theatre, which he thought had become a relatively minor form of drama in the twentieth century.

Those are fighting words, don’t you think? Esslin gave examples of plays that begin as stories in other dramatic media, such as Stephen Sondheim’s A Little Night Music (from an Ingmar Bergman film), Robert Bolt’s A Man for All Seasons (broadcast on radio, televised, staged, and filmed, in that order) and even the longest running play on the stage, Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap (originally written as a radio play, Three Blind Mice). Look at what is playing on Broadway today and you have to admit that the trend identified by Esslin has become the norm rather than the exception. But is Esslin right about theatre and film being essentially the same aesthetic form, or is he overlooking something? If so, what? Why should a stage play based on a movie, an opera, or even pop music be held inferior to plays based on other literary works or history, such as the classic tragedies by Sophocles and Shakespeare? Esslin’s argument about the “unity of drama” sets up a complex issue, suitable for in-depth analysis and discussion, including the enduring drama versus theatre question. There are several vivid cases embedded in the prompt that I constructed above—and we could create many more—but the scope of the topic is quite broad, extending well
beyond any individual works of theatre. This issue also addresses multiple points of controversy with many possible outcomes, and it crosses multiple areas of inquiry, including aesthetics, history, ethics, and business.

**Discussion and dialogue**

No matter what level of instruction you are using, if you are teaching aesthetics, you will inevitably engage in much discussion and dialogue. There is information to be imparted, especially at the foundational level, but aesthetic inquiry naturally leads to discussion and debate because there is rarely a single correct response. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne K. Langer says the questions we ask are even more important and more revealing than the answers. In *How We Understand Art*, Michael Parsons says that “art is valued as a way of raising questions rather than as transmitting truths.” You must have noticed that both this article and its predecessor are full of questions. The study of aesthetics encourages students to examine their own values and society’s values, consider their sources, and contemplate alternatives. Like all branches of philosophy, aesthetics tends towards dialectic, which is the examination of opposing or even incompatible arguments. The purpose of dialectic is to stimulate deeper thinking toward a more coherent and fully reasoned point of view. In aesthetic inquiry, the process is more important than the product. Student-centered discussion can be time-consuming and the novice aestheticians may not produce the answers that their teachers hope to hear, but discussion and dialogue are important for moving to the more advanced levels of aesthetic development. With practice, any teacher can become proficient at facilitating discussion about aesthetic issues. Questions for discussion naturally lend themselves to writing assignments. For those who teach theatre in the context of an English department, there may be some expectation that theatre courses will improve reading, speaking, and writing. Aesthetics education fills that need. Moreover, as someone who has professionally scored student writing for state proficiency exams and the new SAT, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of critical reasoning skills for student writers. Sentence structure, word choice, spelling, and punctuation are all important, but the top scores go to carefully thought-out arguments supported by a clear rationale with selected evidence. The sophomoric attitude about everyone being entitled to their opinion needs to be developed into a more mature understanding that a well-reasoned opinion can influence the opinions of others with tangible consequences. Vivid cases and complex issues in aesthetics are excellent exercises for practicing the type of writing that state and national standards expect from eleventh and twelfth grade students.

**Selection of classroom material**

To stimulate movement toward higher levels of aesthetic development in your students, choose material that offers challenges and alternatives to your students’ developing minds—not just what they want to do, what would be popular, or what would be fun. Often, inexperienced or young artists make the artistic choices that they do because they can think of no alternatives; they are not aware of the full range of possibilities both new and old. This is where the study of aesthetics and theatre history should be applied in the choice of materials for class reading and performance. Do not just talk about comedy of manners or epic theatre. Have students actually do it, read it, and perform it, even if it is only a short monologue or scene. For any artist, the ultimate question of aesthetics is “what does this mean for my own art?” Student artists will have their preferences, of course, which they should be encouraged to explore, but your role as their teacher is to challenge them to higher levels of artistic understanding and achievement. For high school and college students, the most interesting problems are the ones provoked by difficult or challenging works of theatre, so resist the temptation to take the easy way out. Instead, throw Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* or kabuki theatre at them, for example, and see what they do with that.

Exploring aesthetic alternatives is not just an academic fancy for theorists and philosophers—there can be a distinct commercial advantage at the box office as well. Much of the magic in Julie Taymor’s production of *The Lion King* comes from her use of Indonesian performance methods, which are radically different from western theatre conventions. If Taymor had limited her aesthetic vision to what was popular when she was student, she would probably be directing *Fiddler on the Roof* for suburban dinner theatres rather internationally acclaimed plays and films. The founders of Cirque du Soleil applied postmodern aesthetics to traditional circus methods to create not only breathtaking and unforgettable performances, but also an international brand name worth millions of dollars annually. But students cannot think outside the box until they have explored everything in the box first, so theatre teachers play an important role in selecting material that will broaden their students’ horizons.

At the beginning of this two-part series about aesthetics in theatre classes, you may have wondered how you could possibly cram one more topic into your curriculum, especially something as seemingly esoteric as aesthetics. I have tried to show that aesthetics is not at all esoteric but actually quite basic and fundamental to any artistic activity, including theatre. It is not a matter of how do you add aesthetics in; actually you cannot keep it out. With a good understanding of key concepts in aesthetics, the developmental levels of aesthetic growth, and the methods for teaching aesthetics reviewed in this article, you should be able to incorporate aesthetic education into all of your theatre classes. In the end, your students should be both better creators and consumers of theatre, and if so, your mission as a theatre teacher is accomplished.

Jeffrey Leptak-Moreau, a writer and consultant on arts education issues, is the former director of education and advocacy for the Educational Theatre Association.