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Aesthetics and Cultural Diversity: Experience of Teaching Students in Multicultural Environments: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

The issue of implementing aesthetic dimension in teaching students of art and pedagogical specialties as a means of enhancing intercultural dialogue, acquires particular importance in the conditions of a multicultural academic space of higher education institutions, where representatives of diverse cultural backgrounds study together, bringing their own aesthetic traditions and ideas into interaction. The aim of the article is to present common and distinct approaches to aesthetic education in the universities of Poland and Ukraine and to indicate solutions in the field of exchange of ideas, integration and finding common areas that facilitate intercultural dialogue.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The exploration took the form of qualitative research, and the information obtained was taken from documented statements, which, after a deeper analysis, became the basis for preparing the appropriate summary. All respondents confirmed their voluntary participation in the survey by signing the informed consent.

RESULTS

The article considers experience of implementing aesthetic dimension in the curriculum of Ukrainian and Polish universities, highlights pedagogical strategies and methods used by Ukrainian and Polish teachers to form students' aesthetic competence and foster intercultural dialogue in multicultural environments of their higher education institutions. The survey of 296 undergraduate and graduate students of Ukrainian and Polish universities has shown that interaction in the multicultural environment, provided by Ukrainian and Polish universities, enriches students' aesthetic competence, but requires openness, dialogue and willingness to compromise. Joint creative tasks often become a "meeting ground" for different aesthetic ideas and a platform for understanding. Differences in aesthetic ideas do not cause conflicts, but require pedagogical support – facilitation, cultural sensitivity and aesthetic mediation on the part of the teacher. The activities to foster intercultural dialogue include discussions at the academic level, joint research and art projects, as well as joint ventures in the field of aesthetic education (concerts, exhibitions, theatre performances, broadcasts), combined with the exchange of ideas in the spirit of tolerance and constructive narrative.

CONCLUSION

The practical significance of the findings lies in their potential to develop integration strategies that will foster intercultural interaction between representatives of different cultural backgrounds in the process of acquiring aesthetic experience in multicultural environments of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Aesthetic competence development, Multicultural university environments, Intercultural dialogue facilitation, Poland–Ukraine comparative pedagogy, Pedagogical aesthetic mediation

Highlights

- The study revealed the experience of implementing aesthetic dimension in the curriculum of Ukrainian and Polish higher education institutions; highlighted pedagogical strategies and methods used by Ukrainian and Polish teachers to form aesthetic competence in students from diverse cultural backgrounds in multicultural environments; discussed the differences in the assimilation of aesthetic values by students from diverse cultural backgrounds, taking into account their traditions, mentality and worldview.
- Interaction in a multicultural environment enriches students' aesthetic competence, but requires openness, dialogue and willingness to compromise. Joint creative tasks often become a "meeting ground" for different aesthetic ideas and at the same time a platform for understanding. Differences in aesthetic ideas do not cause conflicts, but require pedagogical support – facilitation, cultural sensitivity and aesthetic mediation on the part of the teacher.
- The article recommends developing an integration strategy and support for intercultural exchange through planned aesthetic projects and building contacts that will allow for a free discussion of aesthetic experiences, understanding the symbolism of artistic expressions, and resolving differences and misunderstandings that arise in the multicultural environments.

Introduction

In modern conditions of rapid societal transformations and constant challenges, there is a growing need to form a harmoniously developed personality, capable not only of thinking critically, acting professionally, but also of subtly feeling the beauty, cultural diversity and aesthetic value of the surrounding world. In this context actualizes the issue of implementing the aesthetic dimension into the educational process of higher education institutions. It is indisputable that aesthetic competence today is gaining interdisciplinary significance: it affects pedagogical ethics, professional communication, the ability to express oneself creatively and so on. After all, aesthetic education has long gone beyond the boundaries of arts specialties, becoming an integral part of professional training in the field of social sciences and humanities. In the context of pedagogical education, the aesthetic dimension is not

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limited to the study of art or design – it encompasses the style of thinking, ways of interacting with others, and the culture of the educational environment. This issue acquires particular importance in the conditions of a multicultural academic space of higher education institutions of Ukraine and Poland, where representatives of different nations study together, bringing their own aesthetic traditions and ideas into interaction. In this context, the formation of aesthetic competence also becomes a means of cultural dialogue, understanding, and preservation of identity.

The aim of the article is to present common and distinct approaches to aesthetic education in the universities of Poland and Ukraine and to indicate solutions in the field of exchange of ideas, integration and finding common areas that facilitate understanding and exchange of students' experiences.

Literature Review

Various aspects of aesthetic education and aesthetic competence formation constantly attract the attention of Ukrainian and Polish researchers. The outstanding Ukrainian teacher Hryhorii Vashchenko¹ defines aesthetic education as “a system of measures aimed at revealing and developing in a person the ability to perceive, correctly evaluate, and create the beautiful and sublime in life and art”. From such positions, the goal of aesthetic education is to facilitate the comprehensive development of the individual through art, nature, the beauty of everyday life and the environment, various types of activities in which a person participates, national values, etc. Huk² considers aesthetic education to be an integral component of personal development and a means that unites and harmonizes mental, physical, moral, labor and other dimensions.

Piddiachyi³ views aesthetic education as the basis of the future teacher's professional self-development focusing on aesthetic feelings as a desire to experience and express positive and avoid negative feelings; aesthetic taste as the ability to give phenomena a positive or negative assessment; aesthetic ideal as a desire to approach professional perfection in the process of mastering the teaching profession.

In the Polish pedagogical space, as indicated by Kraśń⁴ (p. 360), aesthetic education is perceived as an approach to the educational aspects of the role of art and is reduced to activities aimed at preparing an individual to perceive and evaluate aesthetic phenomena, including beauty (nature and art). Aesthetic education, as written by Wojnar⁵ (p. 67), is a process of developing the ability to feel and understand beauty, both in art and in everyday life. It includes various fields such as: music, visual art, literature, theater, film, dance, aesthetics of language, behavior and interpersonal relations. Through its action, it helps shape sensitivity, creativity, empathy, imagination, i.e. features that are needed not only in art, but in every area of modern life.⁶ In the second half of the 20th century, the group of Polish researchers exploring issues related to the value of aesthetic education included Gołaszewska,⁷ Suchodolski,⁸ Szuman⁹ and Wojnar¹⁰ – creators of original views

and concepts of aesthetic education. It is also worth mentioning the Polish aesthetician Tatarkiewicz,¹¹ who deals with exploration in historical philosophy and philosophical thought. Today, the impact of aesthetic education in the Polish education system is widely explored by Kisiel, Dubrovina,¹² and Nikolai.^{13,14}

Analysis of the cited literature indicates a shared focus of Polish and Ukrainian educators on the concept of aesthetic education. Despite minor differences in perspective, a shared idea of the value of art in everyone's life is evident. The experience of encountering art allows us to conclude that, in an intercultural dimension, it will become a space for encounter and understanding for people from Slavic cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the effectiveness of interaction in a multicultural environment depends on conscious and ethical attitudes and behavior of its participants, which constitute intercultural competence.^{15,16} It is intercultural competence that provides not only an understanding of cultural differences, but also openness, mutual respect and readiness for dialogue. In scientific discourse, one of the most recognized conceptual approaches to understanding intercultural competence is D. Deardorff's model,¹⁷ which allows for a systematic analysis of the process of its formation and the results of intercultural interaction. Placing emphasis on such components as attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity & discovery), knowledge and skills of interpretation and communication, which together determine the internal and external results of intercultural interaction, D. Deardorff's model does not explicitly address such potentially effective means of intercultural competence formation as art and aesthetics. Byram's¹⁸ model is a valuable tool for assessing intercultural competence, but it primarily concerns language learning.

Similar approaches can be traced in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Conceptual and Operational Framework on Intercultural Competences,¹⁹ which emphasize the importance of the value dimension, critical thinking and dialogue of cultures in the educational process. Nevertheless, the analysis of UNESCO recommendations shows the lack of a clear delineation of the role of aesthetic education in the formation of intercultural competence, thereby revealing a scientific gap that informs the relevance of this study.

Another influential theoretical framework is Bennett's²⁰ Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which draws on constructivist perception and communication theory and conceptualizes intercultural competence as a continuum of development of increasingly complex ways of perceiving and interpreting cultural differences based on how individuals construct boundaries between “self” and “other.” The DMIS distinguishes between ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense, Minimization), characterized by a limited or simplistic perception of cultural differences, and ethnorelative stages (Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration), in which cultural differences are acknowledged, internalized, and incorporated into identity and ethical decision-making in a multicultural context. Unlike

Table 1 | Participants characteristics

University	Country	Degree level	Domestic Students	International Students*	Total
A	Ukraine	B.A.	62	7	69
		M.A.	24	9	33
B	Ukraine	B.A.	71	19	90
		M.A.	36	21	57
C	Poland	B.A.	18	11	29
		M.A.	11	7	18
Total			222	74	296

*The international student populations at Universities A and B consist mainly of students from China, while at University C the student population is more diverse and includes students from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, China, India, Nigeria, and other countries

competence-based models that focus primarily on knowledge and skills, DMIS foregrounds perceptual and experiential transformation, making it particularly relevant for analyzing the role of aesthetic experience in a multicultural environment.

Methods

The article aims at highlighting aesthetic dimension of pedagogical education in two Ukrainian and one Polish higher education institutions, which train B.A. and M.A. students in multicultural environments. Accordingly, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design, focusing on understanding how aesthetic education is conceptualized and experienced by students and teachers in culturally diverse contexts.

The methodology focuses on solving the following research questions.

1. How is aesthetic dimension implemented in the curricula of Ukrainian and Polish higher education institutions?
2. What pedagogical strategies and methods are used by Ukrainian and Polish teachers to foster students' aesthetic competence in multicultural environments?
3. What are the differences in the assimilation of aesthetic values by students from diverse cultural backgrounds, considering their traditions, mentalities and worldview?

To address these issues, the study uses general scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, generalization, comparison) alongside with qualitative research methods (curriculum analysis, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups²¹ with B.A. and M.A. students).

The study was conducted at three higher education institutions: Sumy State Pedagogical University named after A. S. Makarenko (Sumy, Ukraine), South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University named after K. D. Ushynsky (Odessa, Ukraine), and the University of Silesia in Katowice (Katowice, Poland). These HEIs were selected due to their explicit inclusion of aesthetic components in teacher education and art-related programs and their multicultural student composition.

The target sample consisted of undergraduate and graduate students majoring in pedagogical (Educational Sciences, Preschool Education, Primary Education,

Secondary Education) and art specialties (Musical Art, Fine Art, Design, Choreography) who study in multicultural environments. The total qualitative corpus included data obtained from 296 students, whose contributions were analyzed through interviews, focus groups, observations, and documented reflections rather than treated as statistical indicators. Participants represented both resident and international students from Ukrainian (Institutions A and B) and Polish (Institution C) universities. All participants had experience of studying in culturally diverse academic settings, joint participation in courses with an aesthetic component, and interaction with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by university and nationality.

Data collection included 44 semi-structured individual interviews (average duration 45–60 minutes) and 19 focus groups comprising 6–8 participants each (average duration 75–90 minutes). Interviews and focus groups were conducted face-to-face in classroom or university settings for University C (n = 23) and online via video conferencing for Universities A, B (n = 19, n = 21 respectively) due to the security situation in these regions.

The sample was formed using purposeful sampling, based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Enrolment in pedagogical or art specialties,
- Presence of an aesthetic component in the curriculum,
- Experience of multicultural interaction within the academic process,
- Willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews or focus groups.

Participants were recruited through faculty coordinators and course instructors, who distributed invitations in Moodle system, during classes and via institutional mailing lists. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

Data were collected through curriculum documents, observation notes, interview transcripts, and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups followed a flexible guide organized around key thematic blocks related to aesthetic education, intercultural interaction, and personal educational experience.

The data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. An initial phase of open coding was conducted to identify recurring meanings and patterns in the data. Codes were developed inductively from participants' statements and subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes. Throughout the analysis, codes and themes were refined through iterative comparison across data sources (curricula, interviews, observations), allowing for analytic triangulation.

Coding was performed independently by two researchers. Discrepancies in coding and interpretation of themes were resolved through negotiated agreement during joint analytic meetings. Audit records were maintained, including codebooks, analytic notes, and successive versions of thematic maps.

To enhance analytic rigor, coding decisions and emerging interpretations were discussed among the researchers until interpretive consensus was achieved. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, that is, until no substantially new themes emerged from additional materials.

Member checking involved 12 participants, who reviewed summary interpretations of findings to confirm credibility and relevance to their experiences.

Data were collected in Ukrainian and Polish and analyzed in the original languages. When excerpts were translated into English for publication, attention was paid to preserving semantic and cultural meanings. The study adhered to ethical standards of qualitative research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants. Formal ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional requirements at each participating university.

The study has certain limitations, which do not allow to fully generalize the findings, namely: (1) the lack of representativeness of student contingents within the studied countries and internationally due to the narrowing of the sample to two Ukrainian and one Polish university; (2) the different ratio of domestic and international students in different universities of the studied countries, due to a number of objective and subjective factors; (3) the heterogeneity of cultural backgrounds of both residents and international students studying at a particular university.

These limitations were considered in the interpretation and analysis of the results. In particular, the limited representativeness of the sample allowed for a deeper, contextual analysis of individual universities, including a detailed study of the study programs of future specialists who participated in the study, which can serve as the basis for further larger-scale research. The different ratio of domestic and foreign students in different universities opens the opportunity to compare different models of internationalization within specific institutional contexts. This allows us to identify specific trends that are useful for further inter-university or cross-country research. Also, the cultural heterogeneity of the student contingent, instead of being considered exclusively as a limitation, can be used to analyze the dynamics of intercultural interaction and its impact on the educational process. Such diversity

creates additional opportunities for research into the problem of introducing the aesthetic dimension into pedagogical education in multicultural environments.

Results

Aesthetic Education in Contemporary Academic Contexts

Contemporary higher education often focuses on results, exams, or measurable effects of education based on so-called hard skills, neglecting soft skills. However, as Frąckiewicz-Rzymełka and Wilk²² suggest, enhancing the aesthetic sensitivity plays an important role in the development of children and youth. Aesthetic education is not only a contact with art, but also learning to perceive beauty, harmony, expressing oneself and the desire to receive and be in culture. At the preschool, early school and primary levels, aesthetics appears in the form of art, music and technical classes as well as Polish language, history and religion and is reinforced by additional optional classes in small theatre forms, theatre, choir, music and movement groups, dance, art or technical workshops.²³ In secondary schools, this activity often accompanies Polish and foreign language, history, religion and cultural studies classes and, similarly to the primary school stage, although to a limited extent, it is implemented during optional classes.²⁰ Meanwhile, it is at this stage that young people shape their identity, value system and worldview. Mass media, social media platforms and Internet communication have a significant impact in this area of development²⁴ (p. 24).

In the case of education institutions, as Leżańska²⁵ (p. 87) writes, the sense of teachers' aesthetics plays an important role. They are the ones who largely decide on the way of arranging the interiors in which learners spend their time (the colors of the rooms, illustrations, the way of displaying works, the selection and arrangement of everyday objects, etc.). The aesthetic preferences of teachers, their attitude towards art and knowledge of broadly understood aesthetic issues are also of great importance. They also shape pro-musical – aesthetic behaviors by carrying out didactic and educational tasks.⁹ This statement was echoed by students across all three institutions.

However, a small group of respondents – enrolled mainly in non-art study programs at Universities A and B – questioned the relevance of aesthetics for their professional training, describing it as “secondary” or “intuitive rather than teachable,” which constitutes a disconfirming perspective within the data set.

Institutional Models of Implementing Aesthetic Dimension: Cross-Site Comparison

Higher education in Poland, touching on many areas of cognition, focuses on imparting knowledge and developing professional competences²⁶ (p. 52). However, its aesthetic dimension, related to sensitivity to beauty, art, culture and space, is an important aspect of educating students. When shaping a future student as a conscious, creative person, capable of thinking, it is worth paying attention to the powerful power of art

and contact with it. The acquired amount of aesthetic knowledge makes it easier for young people to function at university, not only in the arts or humanities, but also in technical fields such as architecture, design, engineering, etc. After all, the image of the academic space, the culture of discussion, and the creativity of teamwork will depend on aesthetic sensitivity²⁷ (p. 9).

Ukrainian scientist Ziaziun shares similar ideas that professional training and self-education of a future teacher should be aimed at formation and development of a system of knowledge, methods of pedagogical action, experience of creative action as well as a sensory-emotional (aesthetic) personal attitude to the world and its perception.²⁸

Boguszewska²⁹ (p. 194) emphasizes that aesthetic education is a kind of investment in the future, in students who will be more open, aware and creative. To prepare young people for responsible and full participation in academic and social life, we need a school that shapes not only the mind, but also the soul. In this context, aesthetics is no longer a “luxury”, but is the foundation of a deep, humanistic approach to education. Aesthetic education at the academic level is the conscious shaping of sensitivity to beauty, culture and art, as well as the ability to understand and interpret them. The aim of this type of activity is primarily the development of personality, empathy, intercultural competences and creative thinking. In Polish and Ukrainian universities, aesthetic education takes the form of classes and meetings that involve developing the ability to receive and analyze works of art (music, film, theater, literature, visual arts), creative self-expression (design, writing, performative activity) and understanding the ephemeral, visual and symbolic culture of the contemporary world.^{14,30,31}

University C: Structured and Multilevel Integration

When analyzing the curricula, timetables and educational offer of the University C (Poland), it is worth mentioning those forms of aesthetic inspiration that can be read as mandatory and optional classes. In the fields of art and humanities, students can acquire knowledge in the field of such subjects as aesthetics, art history, theory of culture, analysis of cultural texts. In the field of teaching preschool and early school pedagogy, students participate in music, art, technical, dance, voice emission and paratheatrical classes. Extensive knowledge of aesthetics is gained by young people studying artistic fields: music, visual arts, film and ethnology. In technical and exact fields, there are optional subjects of general university rank in the field of culture, art, design: e.g. “aesthetics in design”, “visual culture”, “film and society”. An interesting offer is the first-cycle full-time studies in art therapy, where they study the use of art to help in the therapy of people with various disabilities, disorders in social, emotional, mental or educational functioning, requiring support.

The interdisciplinary programs, implemented in Polish universities, which are a kind of interdisciplinary path of studies combining science and art (e.g. “cultural studies and new media”, “aesthetics and visual

communication”), enjoy great interest among academic youth and lecturers. Artistic workshops and projects have a local scope and a smaller number of recipients. They include the activities of university theaters, choirs, literary groups, photography clubs, etc. Examples of the popularization of these forms of activity are student festivals, artistic plein-air, film reviews and exhibitions. When discussing the aspect of aesthetic education in a higher education institution, one cannot forget about institutional activities. The University C organizes access to multimedia libraries, galleries, concerts and author meetings.

Universities A and B: Discipline-Based and Fragmented Implementation

In the Ukrainian HEIs, aesthetic dimension is implemented in the curriculum of both social sciences (preschool, primary and secondary education) and arts specialties. Students of arts specialties can develop aesthetic competence studying the disciplines of general cycle (history and culture of Ukraine) and specialization cycle (Appendix A, Table A1). In the field of preschool and primary education, students participate in music, fine art, art and design, folklore studies, pedagogy and psychology of creativity, art pedagogy, etc.

As can be seen from the Table A1, art and art-pedagogical specialties in the three analyzed universities implement the aesthetic dimension in the curriculum through professional cycle disciplines, which is a common feature for both Ukrainian and Polish higher education institutions. In contrast to University C, study programs at Universities A and B include fewer explicitly aesthetic-oriented courses, relying instead on implicit integration within pedagogical disciplines. This constitutes a key cross-site difference.

At the same time, content analysis of the study programs of all three institutions allowed us to identify only one course, which contained the word “aesthetics” in its title (Aesthetics of audiovisual forms). Nevertheless, students emphasized that aesthetic worldview formation often occurs through pedagogical interaction rather than formal course labeling.

Pedagogical Strategies for Fostering Aesthetic Competence in Multicultural Context

To find out what pedagogical strategies and methods are used by teachers in Universities A, B and C to form aesthetic competence in students from different cultural backgrounds in multicultural environments and what are the differences in the assimilation of aesthetic values by domestic and international students, we used observations and semi-structured interviews (both face-to-face and in focus groups). The interview guide included several blocks: personal background, curriculum and learning experience, multicultural environment and reflection. Personal background block included questions concerning study program and level of education. Curriculum and learning experience block contained questions about the courses related to art, culture, or aesthetics, their understanding of the concept of aesthetics and their aesthetic

experience. This block also focused on pedagogical strategies and methods, as well as specific projects, classes, or events that respondents found particularly aesthetically meaningful or inspiring. Questions of the multicultural environment block included: “How do you perceive aesthetics when interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds?”, “Have you experienced situations where aesthetic perceptions differed significantly between you and students of other nationalities? How did you respond?”, “What cultural features – yours or others’ – influence aesthetic perception the most?”. Reflection block was aimed at highlighting domestic and international students’ general impressions on implementing aesthetic dimension in their study programs and their visions on enhancing the aesthetic component of their study programs.

Across all three universities, multicultural group work emerged as a central pedagogical strategy for aesthetic learning, though its intensity and institutional support varied. University C students described more structured institutional support, whereas Universities A and B relied more on individual teacher initiatives.

Students of pedagogical specialties most often mentioned such pedagogical strategies and didactic methods as project methods, case studies, interactive lectures with elements of aesthetic modeling, reflective conversations, intercultural dialogues, round tables, discussions, creative tasks, etc., while students of arts specialties mentioned the analysis of works of art (painting, music, literature, theater, cinema), the interpretation of artistic texts (literary and aesthetic approach), comparative analysis of cultural codes, creative tasks: writing essays, creating visual or musical collages, presentations, comparative study of aesthetic perceptions of different cultures, multimedia presentations by students from their own country about aesthetics in traditions, clothing, architecture, intercultural dialogues. Among the aesthetically meaningful or inspiring specific projects, classes, or events the respondents named “Art beyond borders – BRIDGES”, “MOOC ART!”, “One University – Many Possibilities. Integrated Program” and the like (University C), art festival “Lilac blues”, land art festival “Art border area”, workshops in sculpture, Easter egg making and traditional Ukrainian paper cutting art (“Vytynanka”) (University A), choreographic project “Idea”, song and poetry competition “On the strings of the soul!”, choreographic performance “Lesya Ukrainka in Odessa!” (University B).

Multicultural Aesthetic Experience: Convergence, Tension, Negotiation

Students consistently described intercultural interaction as enriching their aesthetic competence. Differences in aesthetic perception were associated with cultural traditions and values:

“I am very interested in seeing how Chinese students approach the design of presentations – everything is so symmetrical, elegant, with deep symbols. It makes me rethink my own approach, because we use more vivid emotions, folklore ornaments, color. Such differences

are enriching and inspiring” (B.A. 2nd year student, University A).

“I study in Poland, and I noticed that Polish and Ukrainian students often approach creativity emotionally, while I am more guided by the principle of balance and harmony. But we learn from each other. I discovered Ukrainian Vytynanka for myself – it is very beautiful” (M.A. 1st year student, University B).

“Aesthetics in a multicultural group is always a compromise. We were creating a poster for an educational project together, and each had their own “aesthetic truth”: the Chinese students wanted a laconic style, the Ukrainians wanted ornamentation and symbolism, and I wanted minimalism. It turned out very interesting!” (B.A. 3rd year student, University C).

A disconfirming case was articulated by one respondent from University B, who stated: *“Sometimes multicultural projects slow the creative process. It is easier to work with people who share the same aesthetic language”* (M.A., 2nd year student).

Characterizing the differences in aesthetic perception, the students named the distinct features of their cultures that influenced their aesthetic perception: simplicity, functionality, minimalism (Poland), bright colors, symbols, beauty as emotion, connection with land, tradition (Ukraine), philosophy of Yin and Yang, harmony, rhythm of nature, symbols, natural colors (international students).

Thus, interaction in multicultural environment, provided by universities A, B, C, enriches students’ aesthetic competence, but requires openness, dialogue and willingness to compromise. Joint creative tasks often become a “meeting ground” for different aesthetic ideas and at the same time a platform for understanding. Differences in aesthetic ideas do not cause conflicts, but require pedagogical support – facilitation, cultural sensitivity and aesthetic mediation on the part of the teacher. The most successful examples are those where elements of different cultures are combined in a single project.

Across all sites, effective aesthetic learning in multicultural environments depended on pedagogical mediation. Teachers acted as facilitators, cultural interpreters, and mediators of aesthetic dialogue. The most successful practices combined elements of different cultures within a single creative outcome.

While University C demonstrated more systemic institutional support for such mediation, Universities A and B relied more heavily on individual teacher expertise and initiative, highlighting another cross-site contrast.

Discussion

Based on the study’s findings, we suggest a conceptual model for fostering intercultural competence through the introduction of the aesthetic dimension into pedagogical education. The proposed model is based on the idea that aesthetic experience acts as a mediator between the individual cultural experience of the student and the process of intercultural dialogue in a multicultural educational environment.

The model assumes a consistent interconnected chain that includes the following practical steps.

Step 1. Incorporating aesthetic dimension into the educational process through art, artistic images, music, visual and bodily practices creates a shared symbolic space accessible to students from diverse cultural backgrounds regardless of the level of language competence. The obtained results indicate that it is aesthetic forms of activity that reduce the barriers between “one’s” and “other” and actualize students’ personal experience.

Step 2. Aesthetic experience activates the emotional-sensory sphere, which contributes to the development of empathy, openness and reflection. The differences between students from diverse cultural backgrounds revealed in the study indicate that aesthetic reactions and interpretations are based on national traditions, mentality and worldviews. At the same time, these differences become the basis for awareness of cultural diversity and rethinking one’s own value orientations.

Step 3. Organized pedagogical support of aesthetic experience (reflective discussions, intercultural interpretations, group interaction) transforms individual aesthetic impressions into a space of intercultural dialogue. In this process, aesthetics ceases to be only a means of artistic development and acquires the function of an instrument of intercultural understanding.

Step 4. Intercultural dialogue, mediated by aesthetic experience, contributes to the formation of key components of intercultural competence: respect for cultural differences, the ability to interpret cultural meanings, readiness for cooperation and tolerant interaction. Thus, the aesthetic dimension is not an additional, but a structural factor in the development of intercultural competence.

The proposed model directly correlates with modern educational strategies of internationalization at home, which emphasize the creation of intercultural learning opportunities within national educational programs. The results of the study demonstrate that aesthetically oriented courses and pedagogical strategies can serve as an effective tool for implementing internationalization “at home”, ensuring intercultural interaction without the need for academic mobility.

In addition, the aesthetic dimension corresponds to the principles of inclusive education, as it involves different ways of knowing and expressing oneself, reduces the dominance of verbal and cognitive forms of learning, and creates conditions for the participation of students with different cultural and linguistic experiences.

Practical implications for teachers and program developers

Based on the proposed model, the following is recommended:

- Inclusion of aesthetically oriented methods (art practices, interpretation of works of art, intercultural creative projects) in teacher training programs,

- Designing training courses in which aesthetic experience is combined with reflection on cultural meanings and intercultural interaction,
- Integration of the aesthetic dimension not only in artistic but also in general pedagogical disciplines,
- Formulation of learning outcomes that combine aesthetic sensitivity with the development of intercultural competence,
- Implementation of co-creation and reflection methods, as well as intercultural dialogue as core pedagogical approaches,
- Application of joint creative projects, art-based presentations, and culturally diverse exchange activities as key pedagogical formats fostering mutual understanding and collaborative learning in multicultural environments.

Conclusions

Aesthetic education is of great importance for students from different cultural backgrounds. It helps develop their creativity, communication skills and social sensitivity, as well as openness to other manifestations of distant culture. Aesthetic experiences promote social integration, exchange of thoughts and experiences, better well-being, and even increase students’ involvement in university life. It also teaches reflection on oneself, the surrounding reality and the ability to recognize manipulation in the era of fake news, omnipresent and intrusive advertising and social media. Individual units (faculties) undertake project activities aimed at developing interest and cooperation in various areas of art. Against this background, challenges related to the deficiencies and absence of aesthetic education in higher education institutions are also emerging. One of them is the insufficient financing of academic culture and the too slow modernization of study spaces (modern multimedia equipment, inspiring design of rooms, corridors of buildings, modest student spaces for rest and individual work, poor décor). Another is treating aesthetic education as an addition and not a priority and poor integration with curricula in non-artistic fields. The formation of aesthetic competence in a multicultural context is more effective when methods of co-creation, reflection and intercultural dialogue are used. Joint projects, art presentations, cultural exchanges play an important role.

As findings show, there is a need to develop an integration strategy and support for intercultural exchange through planned aesthetic projects and building contacts both in person and online. These will allow for a free discussion of aesthetic experiences, understanding the symbolism of artistic expressions, and resolving differences and misunderstandings. Therefore, it is worth increasing access to aesthetic subjects in all fields, promoting artistic activities among students of various fields, developing cooperation between art and general education according to the principle: an aesthetically sensitive student is an open, creative and attentive individual to the world and other people.

The practical significance of the findings lies in their potential to develop integration strategies that will foster intercultural interaction between representatives of different cultural backgrounds in the process of acquiring aesthetic experience in multicultural environments of higher education institutions. The study limitations in future exploitations can be overcome by increasing the number of respondents through the expansion of the base of higher education institutions and broadening the range of the study programs beyond art and pedagogy.

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Appendix A

Table A1 Disciplines that contain aesthetic component at the universities surveyed		University A		University B		University C		
Study Program	Discipline	B.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.	
		Fine Art.	Academic drawing	+		+	+	n/a
Easel Painting	Academic painting	+						
	Fundamentals of composition	+		+	+			
	Composition of easel painting	+						
	Color science	+		+	+			
	History of foreign fine arts and architecture	+						
	History of Ukrainian fine arts Fundamentals of sculptural plastic arts Fundamentals of artistic design	+						
	Art creativity							
	Decorative art	+		+	+			
	Current issues of modern Ukrainian fine arts	+	+	+	+			
	Work with painting techniques	+	+					
	Secondary Education (Fine Art)/ Art Education (Visual Art)	Drawing	+	n/a	+	+	+	+
		Painting	+				+	+
		Artistic design	+					
Decorative art		+		+	+			
Fundamentals of color science		+		+	+			
Sculpture		+				+	+	
History of foreign art History of Ukrainian art (Art history)		+				+		
Art creativity		+		+	+			
Photography							+	
Visual education							+	
Creative education							+	
Ceramics							+	
Graphics							+	
Choreography	History of choreographic art	+				n/a		
	Dance (classical, folk, modern, ballroom, historical, etc.)	+		+	+			
	History of Ukrainian culture			+				
	History of music and theatre		+	+				
	Philosophy of art		+		+			
	Methods and creative technologies in Ukrainian and world choreography		+					
	Synergy of choreographic art				+			
Secondary Education (Musical Art)/ Art Education (Musical Art)	Choral singing	+	n/a	+		+	+	
	Choral conducting	+		+		+	+	
	Main musical instrument	+		+	+	+	+	
	Fundamentals of art theory	+		+				
	Musical art of Slobozhanshchyna	+						
	Philosophy of art				+			
	Musical folklore						+	
	Music Psychology						+	
	History of music and literature						+	
	Rhythmics						+	
	Methods of teaching music and preschool and basic school						+	
	World music						+	
	Music therapy in education						+	
Rhythmics therapy in education						+		

(Continued)

Table A1 | (Continued)

Study Program	Discipline	University A		University B		University C	
		B.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.
Musical Art/ Musical Art (Music in Multimedia)	History of musical performance	+					
	World history of music	+					
	History of Ukrainian music	+		+			
	History of musical styles	+					
	Art Pedagogy			+			
	Fundamentals of Music			+			
	Information and Communication			+			
	Technologies in Musical and Creative Activities		+				
	History of the Evolution of Artistic Styles of Foreign Music			+			
	Philosophy of art		+		+		
	Hermeneutic workshop on musical art				+		
	History of music and literature						+
	Aesthetics of audiovisual forms						+
	World music						+
Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology	Cultural Heritage	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	+	
	Anthropology of Art					+	
	Language and Culture					+	
	Minority Cultures					+	
	Body in Culture					+	
	Applied Anthropology						+
Cultural Education	Art history	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		+
	History of culture						+
	Cultural education in cultural institutions (cinema, library, gallery, theatre, dance theatre)						+
	Interdisciplinary creative education workshops						+
Preschool and Early School Pedagogy	Musical activities	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		+
	Artistic creative workshops						+
	Basics of a child's music education						+
	Methods of Music Education in Preschool and Grades I-III						+
	Methods of Art Education in Preschool and Grades I-III						+
	Propaedeutics of art therapy						+
	Pedagogy of creativity						+
	Rhythmics and dance						+
	Intercultural Education						+
Ethnopedagogy						+	
Preschool Education	Theory and methods of preschoolers' music education in preschool education institution	+		+		n/a	n/a
	Theory and methods of managing children's artistic activities	+					
	Artistic work and the basics of design	+					
	Methods of conducting ethnography classes in a preschool education institution	+					
Primary School Education	Theory and methods of teaching art			+		n/a	n/a
	Methods of teaching musical art	+					
	Teaching methods in the field of technologies and fine arts	+					
	Modern technologies for teaching artistic and technological disciplines	+					

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the curricula of selected universities

Appendix B**Focus Group/Semi-Structured Interview Guide for B.A. and M.A. Students****Purpose**

This guide was developed to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of the aesthetic dimension of pedagogical education in multicultural environments. The questions are aligned with the study's research questions and aim to capture variations in students' assimilation of aesthetic values across cultural backgrounds.

Section 1. Aesthetic Dimension in the Curriculum (RQ1)

1. How do you conceptualize the aesthetic dimension within your study program?
2. In which courses or learning modules do you most clearly encounter aesthetic content?
3. How explicitly are aesthetic values and experiences articulated in the intended learning outcomes of your courses?
4. To what extent do you perceive coherence between aesthetic components and professional training in your curriculum?

Section 2. Pedagogical Strategies and Learning Practices (RQ2)

1. What teaching methods and learning activities most effectively contribute to the development of your aesthetic competence?
2. How do classroom practices encourage aesthetic perception, creativity, and reflective thinking?
3. Can you provide examples of assignments or projects that facilitated deeper aesthetic understanding?
4. How do interactive and practice-oriented methods (e.g., discussion, performance, visual analysis, creative tasks) support your learning in a multicultural environment?

Section 3. Multicultural Context and Assimilation of Aesthetic Values (RQ3)

1. How does participation in a multicultural learning environment influence your understanding of aesthetic values?
2. Do you observe differences in aesthetic interpretations, preferences, or judgments among students from different cultural backgrounds?
3. How do your cultural traditions, mentality, and worldview shape your perception of aesthetic phenomena?
4. To what extent has intercultural interaction contributed to the transformation or expansion of your aesthetic perspectives?

Section 4. Reflexive Evaluation and Educational Impact

1. How do you evaluate your own development of aesthetic competence during your studies?
2. What challenges do you experience in engaging with aesthetic content in a multicultural academic context?
3. What aspects of aesthetic education in your program could be improved to better address cultural diversity?

Ethical Considerations

Participation in focus groups and interviews was voluntary. All students were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of collected data for research purposes only, and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Appendix C**COREQ- and SRQR-Informed Checklist****Domain 1. Research Team and Reflexivity: (COREQ Domain 1; SRQR: Researcher Characteristics and Reflexivity)**

- The researchers' disciplinary background and expertise in pedagogy and aesthetic education are stated
- The researchers have prior experience in qualitative and intercultural research
- Reflexive awareness of researchers' positionality in relation to participants is acknowledged
- Measures to minimize power asymmetry between researchers and student participants are described

Domain 2. Study Design and Context: (COREQ Domain 2; SRQR: Study Design)

- A qualitative interpretive research design is explicitly stated
- The study context (higher education institutions in Ukraine and Poland) is clearly described
- The multicultural nature of the student population is specified
- Participant selection criteria (B.A./M.A. students; pedagogical and art-related programs) are defined
- Sampling strategy and rationale are described

Domain 3. Data Collection Methods: (COREQ Domain 2; SRQR: Data Collection)

- Semi-structured focus groups and/or interviews are used as primary data collection methods
- A standardized interview/focus group guide aligned with research questions is applied across institutions
- Open-ended, non-directive questions are employed
- Data collection procedures are sufficiently detailed to allow methodological transparency
- Audio recording and/or systematic field notes are used to ensure data accuracy

Domain 4. Ethical Considerations: (COREQ Domain 2; SRQR: Ethical Issues Pertaining to Human Subjects)

- Ethical approval or institutional permission is obtained where required
- Participants are informed about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study
- Informed consent is obtained prior to participation
- Anonymity and confidentiality of participants are ensured
- Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any stage

Domain 5. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness:
(COREQ Domain 3; SRQR: Data Analysis and Trustworthiness)

- An interpretive thematic analysis approach is applied
- Coding procedures and analytical steps are described
- Cultural diversity is treated as an analytical dimension rather than a limitation
- Reflexive memos and analytical notes support interpretation
- Data saturation or information power is considered
- Strategies to enhance trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, confirmability) are addressed

Domain 6. Reporting of Findings: (COREQ Domain 3; SRQR: Synthesis and Interpretation)

- Findings are presented in relation to the research questions

- Students' perspectives are illustrated through anonymized quotations
- Similarities and differences across cultural and institutional contexts are analytically discussed
- Interpretations are grounded in empirical data rather than researcher assumptions

Domain 7. Transparency and Contribution: (SRQR: Transparency; COREQ Overall Reporting Quality)

- The checklist enhances transparency and reporting rigor
- Methodological limitations are acknowledged
- The contribution of the study to research on aesthetic education and multicultural pedagogy is clearly articulated
- The appendix supports reproducibility and evaluability of the qualitative study