

Aesthetic Valuing in the Arts **What is the Question?**

The key to aesthetic valuing is the question! The challenge that educators in the arts face is what question to ask at what time in order to forward our student's curiosity, imagination, understanding and cognitive development. The following is a compilation of questions and question asking strategies for use with students from a variety of sources.

I. Essential Questions about Art: Maxine Green

- A. What did you see?
- B. What did you hear?
- C. What did you feel?

II. Finding, Posing and Exploring Problems in Works of Art: Thoughts from Project Zero, Harvard University

A. Problem Finding: Noticing problems or puzzles involves adopting a question-asking and wondering stance and developing alertness to anomalies, puzzles, surprises, and mysteries. Problem finding activities encourage participants to think flexibly, to use their imagination, to probe the surface of things, to look beyond the obvious, to explore the unknown, and to take charge of their own learning. If participants are engaging in problem finding, we would expect to hear three kinds of questions (as characterized by the prototypical examples here):

- A. *Getting Clear Questions or Questions of Clarification:* What is that object in the left corner? What is the title of the piece? Is that a face in the background? Feelings of puzzlement and confusion are often signs that indicate where to ask getting clear questions.
- B. *Finding Out More Questions:* Do we know anything about the time frame in which this was painted? What is the setting of the play?
- C. *Puzzle-Finding Questions:* Why might the artist have chosen to paint the houses upside down? Why didn't the playwright tell us what happened to a particular character as the play ended?

B. Problem Posing: After identifying an area of intrigue or puzzlement, problem posing involves playing with how the problem is posed in order to come up with additional or alternative interesting formulations of the question. This includes revising questions with an obvious or straightforward answer in order to find more intriguing questions, questions with many possible answers, and questions that elude answering such as:

- “Why” questions
- “What if” questions
- “How does it change things” questions
- “What if we knew more” questions
- “What is the significance” questions
- “What if it were so for everyone” questions

III. Expanding Perceptions from *The Intelligent Eyes, Learning to Think About Art* by David Perkins

- Look for something that puzzles you about the work. Try to unravel the puzzle. Look for evidence.
- What is going on here? Is there an event or story I haven't figured out yet?
- Look for surprises: a startling color, an odd object, an unexpected relationship. Where or how does the work surprise you? What did the artist surprise you? Relate the surprise to the whole work.
- What mood or personality does the work project?
- Look for symbolism and meaning. Does the artist have a message? What might it be?
- Look for motion. Does that motion carry a message? Why did the artist create that motion? How did they create it?
- What about the work interests you? How did the artist get you interested? How does this contribute to the whole work?
- Make mental changes. What if you changed a color, material, removed an object? Use your thumb or hand to mask objects and to explore how this changes the work's impact.
- Compare the work with another you know that relates in some way. This could even mean comparing things in different disciplines. "This painting or poem reminds me of a song." What are the similarities and the contrasts?
- Try to locate the work in time, historically and in place. What was going on at that time in that place? Knowing that, what is the artist portraying about that time and place?
- Look for specific technical dimensions. Notice colors and how they relate; the major shapes and how they balance or unbalance one another; the use of line, jagged, smooth, quick, careful.
- What is going on in this work of art? What colors do you see?
- Does anything in this work of art remind you of something from your own life?

IV. Habits of Mind: Central Park East, Deborah Meier

- How do you know that? What's the evidence?
- Who said it and why? (point of view)
- What led to it? What else happened? (Cause and effect, pattern and connections)
- What if? Supposing that? (Hypothesizing)
- Who cares? What difference does it make?

V. Focused Conversation About an Art Work

THE ORID PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL

From "The Art of Focused Conversation"

Editor: Brian Stanfield, 2000, for the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs

- A focused conversation uses questions framed at four hierarchical levels:
O = Objective Level
R = Reflective Level
I = Interpretive Level
D = Decisional Level
- This conversation method has its roots in the holistic understandings of human process that may be traced back to Jean Paul Sartre, Edmund Husserl and Soren Kierkegaard. It is based on the natural way that human beings process information.
- It recognizes that our nervous system is at the same time a data-gathering system (we observe what is going on), an emotional processing system (we react to it internally), a meaning-creation system (we recruit our cognitive abilities to make sense of it), and a decisional/implementing system (we make a decision on how to respond).
- This is a natural internal process of perception, response, judgment and decision.
- For example: As a taxi driver puts his foot on the accelerator, he notices a yellow light ahead (objective level). "Drat!" he exclaims (reflective level). He makes some very quick mental calculations, estimating his chances of making it through the intersection before the light turns red (interpretive level). Then, on the basis of these calculations, he jams on the brake, bringing the car to a squealing halt (decisional level).
- So, this method of asking questions in a way that goes with a human being's natural response to any given situation can be very powerful framework for a conversation.

These questions can be used for Visual Arts, Dance, Theatre, or Music. The important thing is to follow the sequence through the four types of questions starting with the objective category.

Objective Questions: (observation level)

What do you see? What shapes, colors, images?

What catches your attention?

What do you remember?

What happened? What was said? What gestures did the characters make?

Describe the objects in the painting.

What words, images, or phrases still linger in your mind?

Reflective Questions: (feeling, reaction level)

How did you feel? What did you feel?

What did the things you saw remind you of?

Where do you see these thing in your own life?

What repelled you?

What delighted you?

What surprised you?

Interpretive Questions:

What does it mean?
What is the work saying about you? Others?
Is there a key insight?
Where is this going on in your life?
What is the message?

Decisional Questions:

What is the work beckoning us to do, to know, to be?
What would you do in this situation?
What does the artist want us to do?
What new insights do you have?
Do you value the work? Why?

VI. Visual Thinking Strategies: San Jose Museum of Art, Education Dept.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a questioning strategy created by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Phillip Yenawine. In this inquiry method, children make discoveries in the art they examine instead of being told things.

Discussions begin with fairly open ended questions:

What's going on in the picture?
What is happening here?
What about this picture?
What else can you find?
What more do you see?
What can you add to that?
Who sees something else?
Does anyone see something different?
What do you see that makes you say that?
What makes you think that?
How do you know that from this picture?
Where do you see that?
What do you mean by that?
Who is this person?
Where is this taking place?