

ABSTRACT

A Teaching Artist/professor/author focuses on the essential practices in guiding student dialogue about works of art.

Improving Student Dialogue About Art

This is a practical article on ways to improve the quantity and quality of students' discussions about art, both the art that they make and that of professional artists. The article is informed by research into what philosophers of art and literature have said about critical discourse;¹ by examinations of professional critics' thoughts about criticism and their critical and historical writings about art;² and by active engagement of learners of all ages, in pre-schools and colleges, community groups, and senior-citizen communities.³

Presuppositions underlie the article: Learning to make art does not necessarily transfer to appreciating or enjoying art. Learning to make art does not necessarily transfer to learning to infer meaning in art, especially art made by artists other than oneself. Therefore, learning to talk thoughtfully about art is especially valuable, perhaps more valuable than learning to make art. Learning to interpret meanings of works of art is more valuable than learning to judge their value. An artwork that is not interpreted is reduced to a mere object.⁴ Artworks do not "speak for themselves"; they carry multiple meanings and not fixed, single meanings. Artworks have rights and cannot mean *any ol' thing* anyone wants them to mean.⁵

The meanings of artworks are not limited to what their makers intended them to mean. There is (obvious) transferability of aspects of talking and writing about works of visual art to music, literature, dance, theater, as well as objects of popular culture experienced in daily living.



Mrs. Barrett's Husband
by Spencer, age 4, 2004

Terry Barrett

Correspondence regarding this article should go to:

Terry Barrett
Department of Art Education
The Ohio State University
128 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210
barrett.8@osu.edu
(614) 292-4741

Prompts for Thematic Dialogues

Getting started. Beginning can be as simple as you (the facilitator) selecting a work to discuss and saying, “Let’s see what we can say about this work. Who would like to get us started?” “Thank you, Thuy. Who can add to her thought?” Sometimes I let the group decide which work to begin with if there are many to choose from. However, I do have in mind a general theme or direction for learning that I would like the group to pursue and that I let guide my facilitation of the conversation. I do not want a discussion about art to be “all over the map.”

Simple and clear rules of procedure are sometimes necessary for any age group. The rules I use most frequently are: (1) No side-conversations. Side-conversations naturally emerge when viewers are excited and engaged with a work, but they distract the whole group, and if you allow them, you will have five or ten conversations rather than one. “Samantha, I want all of us to hear what you are saying—please tell all of us and not just Maria.” (2) One person speaks at a time, and everyone attentively listens to that speaker. (3) “Please limit your comments to *one thought at a time* so that we can better follow you.” This rule also allows more people to participate more often.

“Artworks have rights and cannot mean any ol’ thing anyone wants them to mean.”

If I give a preliminary pep-talk, it is very brief, and something like: “This will be a good session if we can have an interesting discussion about this work,” or, “I’d like to see how smart we can be in thinking and talking about this piece.”

I do *not* say such things like, “There are no wrong answers in here—this is an art class.” In fact, I have heard many wrong answers in response to questions about art, and I do not want to reinforce the notion that *anything* one says about art is relevant or valid. (Nor are all comments about art equally insightful: Some are simply better than others because they are better expressed, more informed, more relevant to what we have seen or heard in the piece, and so forth.)

Sometimes, as a warm-up exercise, I start with “quick-writes,” asking participants to write honestly for a few minutes whatever comes into their minds about a work, not to worry about spelling or grammar, and not to self-censor. I then collect these and read them anonymously back to the group, so that we get a quick range of reactions and prompts for further discussion. This method is particularly effective for controversial work. I let participants know beforehand that their words will be anonymous to encourage their forthright responses.

Description Prompts

Some Teaching Artists have expressed difficulty in getting students of various ages to talk (or write) about art at all, or to offer statements beyond: “I like it!” “It’s cool.” “I don’t like it.” “That’s not art!”

Begin with *what is there* by asking, “What do you see?” if the piece is in front of them. For a piece that existed in time, like a dance or a play, ask, “What do you remember about what you saw and heard?” Desirable answers to these questions are *factual descriptions* and not opinions or preferences. For example, when looking at the painting, *I and the Village*, by Marc Chagall, a good answer would be, “I see the large green face of a man staring at the face of a large white goat.” An unacceptable answer would be, “I don’t like it,” or “It’s a really cool picture.” To remarks such as the latter, the facilitator can *redirect*: “Yes, but please tell us what

you *actually see* in the painting (or recall from the concert). *Name things.*” Continue: “What does someone else see (or remember)?” “Who can add to that?” “Does everyone see what Li-Yan said?” Do not allow viewers to point with their fingers, which tends to end discussions and does not develop language skills. Ask them instead to “Point with your words.”

Learners of middle-school age and older tend not to want to describe what they see because they fear they are stating the obvious and do not want to appear foolish, especially in front of their peers. It is important to encourage descriptive observations by saying, “We all see things differently.” “We each notice some things that someone else might not notice unless we say it out loud.” Speakers will also too readily say, “She already said that (what I was going to say).” Be encouraging and say, “Yes, but go ahead and say it in your own words.” Most often, the new words will provide new insights. Be reinforcing and honest: “Thank you, I didn’t notice that until you said it!”

Description, when it is quick and lively and many people are contributing, is enjoyable and enlightening. Description itself counts as criticism,⁶ and *careful description itself may provide sufficient learning.* Ralph Smith named this kind of criticism “exploratory aesthetic criticism,”⁷ the purpose of which is to experience all that can be seen (or heard) in a work of art. Descriptive dialogue is a very effective way to recall what one has seen or heard, and to “see” and remember more about something experienced in a past time and a different place, such as a dance, a play, or a concert.

Description can also be tedious, boring, and *reductive*: “Tell me what colors you see.” “Do you see triangles?” To avoid reductionistic description, such as naming elements of design *apart from their contribution to the expressive meanings* of any piece, direct descriptive observations toward suspected meanings and important expressions in the piece. Recognizing and counting triangles, of which there are many in Chagall’s *I and the Village*, may contribute to mathematical knowledge but does little, in itself, to decipher the important ideas and feelings Chagall expressed in the work.

When leading descriptive conversations, decide when to move on based on your reading of the participants’ interest level and on the significance of the learning you think is taking place. A related move beyond description located somewhere between description (What is there?) and interpretation (What does it mean?) is to ask: “*How do you feel* when you see the man with the green face?” “*What in the painting* has you feeling that way?” “*What has the artist done* (choreographer, dancer, composer, poet) that you feel that way?” “You noticed that there are many triangles in this painting: *How do the triangles affect the meaning of the painting?*” I do *not* ask, “Why did the artist do such and such?” because this question requires *mind reading* of the artist, and I want to teach people to *read works of art.*



Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*. 1911
Oil on canvas, 6' 3 5/8" x 59 5/8".

Mrs. Simon Guggenheim fund. (146.1945)
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Interpretation Prompts

Interpretation is a process that entails answers to questions such as: “What is it about?” “What does it mean?” “How do I know?” “What does it mean *to me*?” “What *might* it have meant *to the artist*?” “How might my experience of this work (dance, poem, play, concert, sculpture, ceramic mug) *change my life*?”

The question “What does it mean?” can be directed in many different ways. What does it mean to me, personally? What does it mean to our immediate group who is examining it? What might it mean to the artist (composer, musician, choreographer, dancer, playwright, director, actor, and so forth)?

Note that in the cases of plays, concerts, films, and other kinds of artistic events, multiple interpretations are at work: the author’s or composer’s intended meaning, the director’s or actors’ interpretations of that meaning, and the meanings the audience derives. Examinations of some or all of these perspectives could provide stimulating thought and discussion, especially when the artists responsible for the piece are present during the discussion.

For historical works, two questions arise: (1) “What did it mean to the people for whom it was made *back then and over there*?” and (2) “What meanings might it have for *us today*?” As literature teachers and scholars tell us, a Shakespeare play would carry meanings to his original audiences that might be lost on us today; and nonetheless we continue to perform and watch Shakespeare plays today, presumably, in part, because they have relevance to our lives now. (As adults, it is easy for us to forget that Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Memorial* is an historical work for most of those we teach.)

Tensions can arise between *personal meaning* and *communal meaning*. What a work means *to me* may not be what it means to another *community* of interpreters. Certainly this was the case when the Taliban of Afghanistan destroyed monumental, ancient Buddhist sculptures as “false idols,” or when the Ayatollah Khomeini condemned Salman Rushdie to death for writing the novel *Satanic Verses*. Less extreme examples are found in daily teaching. Some Christian viewers, for example, will view most every work of art as having a pertinent message about Jesus and his teachings, whether it does or not. Personal history is very much in play in viewing works of art: Sadly, a fourth-grader who was examining a Sally Mann photograph of a boy holding a skinned squirrel that he had hunted insisted that the squirrel was “burned.”

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The fourth-grader’s teacher later informed me that an abusive parent had burned the child. Young children will freely launch rambling stories about their experiences with the subject matter of a painting: “I have an aunt who...”

An intellectual objection to these kinds of misinterpretations is that *works have rights*: *All works, both historical and contemporary, set limits on how they can reasonably be interpreted*. The rights of a work are established in part by the work’s “internal textual coherence” that resists any “uncontrollable drives” of the interpreter.⁸ If we are after plausible interpretations of a work, we cannot just fix on one or two elements of the work and forget about the rest of the elements or the cultural and historical context in which the work was made.

Nor should the artist be allowed to over-determine for viewers what the work means simply by declaring what the artist’s intent was in making the piece. The artist may have expressed something other than what was intended. Relying on artists’ statements of intent for the basis of interpretation presents other problems. Many artists do not provide their intent

in language, but only in the work itself. Some artists refuse to talk about their intent, leaving interpretation to viewers. Other artists work with unconscious intents. Most importantly, from an educational point of view, relying on the artist to make the work *and* explain the work takes all interpretive responsibility from the viewer and places it on the maker. *Relying on intent as the basis for interpretations will render passive rather than active interpretive viewers.*

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Therefore, when an artist whose work we are discussing is present, I ask the artist to assume the posture of a “fly on the wall,” to listen carefully, and to refrain from explaining the work. This allows the artist to listen to how viewers are receiving the work. Most artists find such information valuable. When student artists speak about their own work during an interpretive discussion, they often unintentionally undermine the discussion: They become defensive and want to explain; in the face of compliment they become embarrassed and want to deflect praise; or they close conversations by giving supposedly definitive answers about meanings that should remain open-ended. Dogmatic museum curators and educators can do the same by giving “THE right answer” to interpretive questions that may yield many sensible and informative answers.

Communal meanings are those formed and generally held by a community of like-minded and interested interpreters, including historians, critics, directors, curators, performers, and artists who made the works. Communal interpretations can temper over-zealous or dogmatic individual interpretations. Had the Ayatollah read *Satanic Verses*, conferred with the author, literary critics, and theologians before making his decision, the outcome may have been one other than a death penalty for the novelist (“the mother of all reviews,” according to pundits at the time). Communal meanings can also deepen shallow interpretations. Although William Wegman may merely be the “dog photographer” for many viewers, for those knowledgeable about contemporary art his photographs are significant works that contribute significantly to Conceptual Art.⁹ A painting that triggers stories for someone about their aunt can be redirected to *what is actually shown in the painting*. As a teacher, if I facilitate a discussion of Barbara Kruger’s text and image pieces, for example, and my class comes up with interpretations that are far removed from what the community of art scholars says about her work, I believe I have conducted a discussion that is misinformative about her work. Authoritative communal understandings guide my teaching and give me confidence of knowing that I am on the right track.

On the other hand, if we simply convey important and authoritative communal knowledge that has *no personal meaning* for our learners, we are merely providing factual knowledge that might serve them at a future cocktail party, should they remember it that long, or aid them in getting some answers correct on a test. As an artist and educator, my goals are much higher. In the inspirational thinking of the Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, *there should be no difference between interpreting a work and using it to better one’s life*. For Rorty, *a meaningful interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one’s priorities and to change one’s life*.¹⁰

Judgment Prompts

Judgment is a process of discovering the value of a work: “How is this a good work of art?”—to phrase the question positively. In studio critiques of student works-in-progress, the

question can be phrased: "This is already good: How might it be even better?"

To challenge careful thinking, I often outlaw the word "like" in critical discussions. Bluntly, critical discourse should not entertain likes and dislikes: Personal preferences are just that—personal, and everyone is allowed them. Statements of preference only provide information about the individual speaking, but provide little insight into the work being discussed. Judgments, however, are about *what is valued and why*. A responsible judgment requires at least (1) a clear statement of appraisal, and (2) reasons for the appraisal. Better yet, a judgment ought to have (3) an explicit criterion on which the judgment is made.

Whenever someone says "I like," I say something to the effect that "because you like it does not make it a good work of art." I then ask him or her to rephrase and say, "This is a good work of art *because...*" When someone says, "It's cool," I say, "Tell us what about the work is cool and *why* you think it is cool. What qualities in the work make it cool?"

In general, however, I choose to spend my precious time spent on art talk with descriptive and interpretive thought. I believe interpretation is at the heart of understanding and appreciating art. When one understands a work, one likely will judge it to be good and also end up enjoying it, which is a highly desirable affective outcome.

Discussions of Art Theory

Theory is a process that entertains large questions about *all* art, rather than specific pieces of art, although big questions often arise from single works. Theory most naturally comes out of critical discussions about particular works: "Why is *that* art?" When viewers raise such prompts for theoretical discussions, a facilitator has two options: pursue answers to the question then and there, or table it for another time and place.

One intellectually responsible way to diffuse the question "Why is that art?" is to make a fundamental and important distinction between using the term 'art' as a descriptive term or as an honorific term.¹¹ Confusing the two senses of the term leads to misunderstandings. When I tell my wife that I am going into my studio to make art, I do not mean to suggest to Susan that I am going to make a great work of art, merely that I am going to engage in art-making activity rather than, say, writing an article. I am using the term 'art' in a descriptive sense. Many people, however, assume that the term 'art' is always honorific, that is, a compliment, and sometimes a great compliment: "Now that's a work of art!"

I do not want to encourage "whining about art." When I receive negative appraisals in the form of statements or questions about why something is art, or why something is in an art museum, I turn to the Institutional Theory of Art developed by Arthur Danto and George Dickel.¹² By this theory, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* is a work of art, while a similar Brillo box in a grocery store is not a work of art; it is a container of household cleaning materials. Why? Context: Intellectual and historical context that would take too long to explain to the objecting viewer, but instead one can simply and reasonably say, "This is a work of art because it is housed in an art museum, and not in a grocery store, because people who spend their lives with art think it is a valuable work that should be preserved and cared for. Why might *someone* think this is a good work of art, even though you do not?" I remind viewers that they do not have to *like* something, but I also ask them to take the work seriously for at least the length of our discussion of it.

The order of description, interpretation, and judgment used here is a logical progression, but one need not follow it when teaching. One can start *anywhere*: "Why do you think the museum personnel think *this* is a valuable piece of art?" Or, "What piece puzzles you most?"

Let's talk about it." Or, "What do you think this piece is about?" In the course of a careful discussion of a work, the discussion will necessarily involve description and interpretation and possibly judgment and theory. To always start with description and then and only then move to interpretation, judgment, and theory is neither logically necessary nor necessarily stimulating.

Prerequisites for Dialogue

Good facilitators have to know how to gain the trust of their participants by asking honest questions, listening attentively to responses, expressing sincere feelings, being patient with the respondents and the pace of the discussion, encouraging the timid and generating a general attitude of respect among everyone involved.

A Suitable Physical Environment

If the group cannot see or hear what is being discussed, frustration will quickly mount and behavior problems will result. If the group is spread out all over a room or studio, conversation can be physically very difficult. Rearrange furniture and form a small circle. A group of twenty-five viewers probably cannot have a good discussion about a tiny work, such as a finger ring, for example. A small TV or computer monitor cannot accommodate adequate viewing for a large group. If acoustics are horrible, conversations will be quite challenged—perhaps writing rather than speaking would be better in such situations.

Select Appropriate Works

Choose works that you believe will inherently interest your group, avoiding objects or events that are far above or below the group's experience levels. Pick works whose subject or style is likely to engage the group. Move from what they know to what they are comfortably able to learn. Select works that will be yielding to the group's questions and observations, ones that invite open-ended interpretive thought. Later, move to increasingly challenging works when the group is better prepared to engage in them.

Multiplicity of Voices

Encourage a multiplicity of voices within the group. Call on the silent ones. Ask particular individuals, by name, what they think about what has just been said.

Bring *absent voices* into the conversation to further and deepen it when necessary: "Yes, Marcel, I know one critic who said something similar, namely..." "I know the artist has made this comment about her work..."

"Who (not here) might most appreciate this work? Why?"

"Might this work offend some people? Why? What would you say to them to help them become more comfortable with it?"

"Does this work especially address a certain group? How can you tell?"

"Does this work exclude certain people? Who? Why do you think so?"

Closure

I do not like to have a session end unexpectedly by the ring of a bell. I try to bring some closure to the conversation, usually in the form of summative remarks. I do not want the group to leave the discussion thinking that everything is so open-ended that we can arrive at

no conclusions. I try to cover “What have we discovered about ____ today?” “What do these works we discussed today have in common?” “Based on what we have seen and heard, what is the worldview put forth by this art?” “What would this art have you believe about the world and people?”

Writing in response to a good prompt is an excellent way to further and also bring closure to thinking begun in a discussion. After having discussed many individual paintings by René Magritte, for example, I have asked students to write a short paper beginning with the phrase “The world of Magritte...” After having discussed many videos or still photographs made by William Wegman, I have posed this writing question: “Are Wegman’s works about dogs or about people?” Such prompts and questions force the viewer to generalize about the cumulative effect of particular works. Because time in arts classes is very limited, I encourage classroom or English teachers to take up these writing activities, and they are often pleased to do so.

Endnote:

- 1 Umberto Eco. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 2 Morris Weitz. *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972.
- 3 See, for example, Terry Barrett. *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- 4 See, for example, Terry Barrett. *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. 2nd ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- 5 See, for example, Terry Barrett. *Talking About Student Art*, Worcester, MA: Davis, 1997, and Terry Barrett, “Criticizing Art with Others,” *Pluralistic Approaches to Art Criticism*, D. Blandy & K. Congdon, eds. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1991, pp. 66-72.
- 6 Arthur Danto. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981.
- 7 Umberto Eco. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 8 Morris Weitz. *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972.
- 9 Ralph A. Smith. “Teaching Aesthetic Criticism in the Schools,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 7, No. 1, 1973, pp. 38-49.
- 10 Eco, p. 95.
- 11 See, for example, Martin Kunz, ed. *William Wegman*, New York: Abrams, 1990, and Craig Owens, “William Wegman’s Psychoanalytic Vaudeville,” *Art in America*, March 1983, pp. 101-108.
- 12 Richard Rorty. “The Pragmatist’s Progress,” in Eco, p. 92.
- 13 Morris Weitz. “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XV, 1, September 1956, pp. 27-35.
- 14 Danto, pp. 91-95.

Terry Barrett is a Professor of Art Education at The Ohio State University and author of books of interest to Teaching Artists: *Interpreting Art*, *Talking About Student Art*, *Lessons for Teaching Art Criticism*, *Criticizing Art*, and *Criticizing Photographs*. Dr. Barrett serves as an Art Critic-in-Education for the Ohio Arts Council.