

# Reacting to Expressions of Art, A Creative and Critical Process For Students

Dr. Satyamangal Rege

*Professor Dean/Vasantdada Patil Pratishthan's College of Engineering & Visual Arts*

**Abstract—Students should actively engage in responding critically to artistic expressions as part of the Art Education curriculum. It is important to encourage students to engage thoughtfully with a variety of artworks during this interactive process.**

**Index Terms—Responding to art, Observation**

## I. INTRODUCTION

If the right questions are asked at every stage, the approach can be applied to all kinds and genres of art. The procedure can also be modified to fit the needs and skills of the student. The teacher's degree of questioning and the amount of material looked at at each stage should reflect this. Students are given the chance to articulate and justify their individual answers during the process. It promotes conversation, teaching pupils that different people can interpret the same artistic works in different ways.

### Seven Steps in the Process

Given below are some steps a teacher can follow to guide students in responding to visual art works.. It is not entirely satisfactory to break down this viewing/listening procedure into steps.

The seven steps presented here are as follows:

Step One: Preparation • Step Two: First Impressions • Step Three: Description • Step Four: Analysis • Step Five: Interpretation • Step Six: Background • Step Seven: Information • Summary of the Steps Informed Judgement

Students studying art education will have learned more about the terminology and concepts unique to the visual arts across time, as well as how each art form expresses ideas and emotions.

Students will contribute a variety of viewpoints and associations to the conversation, including their own distinct cultural and individual viewpoints. It is necessary to create an environment of trust and respect because these viewpoints are individual and will differ from student to student. Given that their distinct viewpoints will improve the viewing

experiences of other students, teachers should encourage pupils to voice their own thoughts.

Teachers and students should keep in mind that different people will respond in different ways to the same arts expression. It is also true that one person can, and in most cases should, respond in more than one way. The following are three ways of responding:

Responding on a creative level -- This refers to feelings evoked by the work of art. Responding on an associative level -- This refers to associations one makes with the visual image. Associations could be of a personal nature or could come from a cultural perspective.

Responding on a critical level -- This refers to responses one has after a formal analysis and interpretation of the art work.

The three categories of reactions differ and change in focus depending on the observer and the piece of art. For instance, a composition may elicit an emotional reaction in one listener or spectator and an intellectual one in another. One piece of art may require an instant emotional reaction, which is how most people will react at first, while another may require that most listeners or viewers immediately connect the pictures in the piece.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### Step One: Preparation

The value of a student's watching or hearing experience can be increased by preparing them for interaction with a piece of visual art. Reminding them that everyone reacts differently to the same artistic expression and that our answers are influenced by our cultural backgrounds and experiences is a good idea at this point.

The preparation information should be brief. Too much information can strongly influence the students' first impressions and inhibit the flow of ideas. Depending on the experience of the students, topics to be discussed could include the following:

- The form or style of the arts expression Brief biographical information about the artists involved
- Some introductory historical and cultural insights into the work
- A look at the times during which the work was originally created
- Questions of audience responsibility, ranging from basic points of audience etiquette to the more complex issues of the individual's recognition of his or her own personal biases as an audience member (for example, cultural biases or the student's past experiences with the arts) Teachers might want to say a few things about how people generally feel about seeing or listening to art before the class discussion starts. Here are some examples of remarks a teacher could make to help students adopt the mindset that will enable them to participate in a conversation about a new form of artistic expression:

When confronted with a piece of art, especially one that is contemporary, many listeners or viewers may listen to it briefly and then discard it, stating things like, "This does not seem or sound like art to me," or "This is a complete waste of everybody's time." This occurs so often because many individuals are unsure of what to listen for or look for when they are shown a new piece of art. As a result, individuals could disregard the works before they have made a sincere effort to comprehend them, making rash conclusions. This is not to imply that all art will or should appeal to everyone. The idea is that you should be prepared to think things through and base your choice on some good standards, regardless of what you ultimately conclude about an artwork. It is very important to remember that, when you are working through this process, there is no single right answer and many answers can be correct. However, attitude is all important. When you respond to a new art work, you should assume that the artist had something to say, some reason for creating this work. Try to see, hear and understand everything that you can. As long as you honestly answer the questions that arise as best you can, you cannot go wrong.

In the end, your opinion of an art work is valid if you can support your opinion with your reasons and knowledge."

Viewing and listening is a discovery process. Students will learn from the works and will discover concepts that can be investigated further at the appropriate time.

#### Step Two: First Impressions

This step gives students the opportunity to air or record their first spontaneous reactions to a work. Everyone has such reactions, even people with years of experience with art works, and denying students the opportunity to express them will cause frustration. Provide a non-judgemental atmosphere where the students will feel confident to give their first reactions and where all students' reactions will be accepted. Throughout this entire process, students must feel that their unique contributions will be valuable, that their opinions are valid, and that the opinions and perspectives of others are to be respected. First impressions can later be used in two ways: students can see how they have grown through the process of discussing the work of art; students can try to explain their first impressions through further investigation and discovery.

It is important that students understand they are neither expected to change their minds nor expected to find a way to justify their first impressions. Some students will change their impressions; some will not. There are no set expectations either way. You can solicit student's first impressions by asking, "What is your immediate reaction to the work?" If students have trouble answering that or a similar question, ask them for words which immediately come to mind.

Record the student's first impressions on chart paper or have them keep track themselves on a sheet similar to Responding to Arts Expressions.

First impressions of an unfamiliar arts expression can be very revealing. These initial reactions may actually tell us more about ourselves than the art work or creator, because the sounds and images we like or dislike are strongly influenced and determined by our past listening and viewing experiences. Remember, there are no wrong answers if the responses are offered sincerely. Teachers may want to point out to students that this step is where many people stop when they are responding to an arts expression, but students will be going further to investigate the work in more depth.

Encourage students by asking questions such as the following:

- What are the first five words that come to mind when you think about this art work?
- What moments did you like the most?
- What was your overall impression?
- Was there a central idea that stood out for you?

**Step Three: Description** This step requires students to recall and describe what they have seen and heard in the art object or painting. At this stage they are simply describing what they have observed, in the same way they might take inventory in a store. They are not interpreting. It is not necessary at this point to try to figure out what the artists are doing or how the artists have manipulated the elements, design or composition principles. Encourage students to stick to the facts. Note also that some works of art demand interaction through the senses other than sight or hearing -- objects that are meant to be touched. Students should record such descriptions as well. Once the students are able to describe the work they will have a basis for further investigation. When you receive words which indicate interpretations rather than descriptions, make note of them on another part of the paper or on the blackboard. Tell the students that words such as happy, mournful or exciting express their personal opinions, as someone else may think the work is relaxing rather than boring, or irritating rather than exciting. Look for any recurring answers that could provide a broad overview of the work. Emphasize that since we all see the work differently, each comment is valuable. Every student chooses, observes, or hears something that interests them, then explains it using language and style that are specific to them. The language that pupils have acquired throughout the years to describe artistic expressions will grow with practice. Students should feel at ease using the common terminology and concepts for the art strand by the time they reach the Senior classes. When it is appropriate, include arts language in discussions about the student's experiences to aid in the development of this vocabulary.

A student's descriptive list might include observations such as those listed below.

Visual art students may create a list of descriptions, including: a hoarding, an outdoor scene, two yellow shapes that resemble hands, a red and black swirling line on the face's forehead, and large, bold markings. Students will obtain an objective list of their observations after completing this phase.

#### Step Four: Analysis

Students are instructed to concentrate on the components found in a piece of art and search for connections between and among them in this step. During the analysis phase of visual art, students will attempt to determine how the artist used pictures,

design principles, and art elements to create particular results. Inquire about the "qualities" that students perceive in the piece, such as dripping paint, sloppy lines, extremely accurate lines, and several seemingly spinning circles. In order to construct real or perceived space, students need also examine how the elements are used and modified. They should also take note of the artist's decisions about the images and how they are used and selected within the piece.

Visual Art Elements: line, colour, texture, shape, form, space

Principles of Design: balance, rhythm, emphasis, variety, contrast proportion/scale harmony

Some questions a teacher might ask include the following:

- How was colour used by the artist? How did the artist use colour to get the desired effect? Does a particular image or aspect of the artwork catch your attention because of its colour?
- To what effect did the artist use line? Do the lines draw your eye along any particular path of movement
- Do they emphasize any one part of the work?
- Are the shapes you see geometric or organic? What effect did the artist achieve through his or her choice?
- What role do the pictures have in the piece? In what order? What connections exist between and among the pictures?
- What about the contrast? What role does contrast play in this work?
- What do you notice about the artist's choice and use of materials?

Another topic for discussion at the analysis stage is style. The particular way the elements are combined or put together creates style. Style refers to the artistic characteristics of a particular visual artist, culture, region or period. For example, style might refer to the visual art of the Romantic era.

**Step Five: Interpretation** Students have now looked over all of the "evidence" that is included in the work. They have applied their knowledge of artistic elements, design and composition principles, and other pertinent subjects. They will now try to ascertain the work's objective. The stage of interpretation occurs when the student's personal opinions, associations, and experiences are integrated with the evidence shown in the artwork. As with the "first impression" stage of this

procedure, there are no erroneous interpretations if students provide honest responses. However, an answer needs to go beyond the student's initial response and offer a description and analysis of the two preceding steps. Students will combine correlations from their real-life experiences with responses from their imaginations during the interpretation process. Associations might vary greatly depending on the student's cultural background, personal beliefs, and previous exposure to the arts. Students must be encouraged to move beyond free association. The audience's own viewpoint shifts as they combine associations, originality, and concrete evidence from the work. Teachers might want to make some general comments to students, such as the following: "All art works are about something. Some abstract works are about concepts such as colour or form. Some are about feelings. Some realistic works are about their subject matter -- some landscapes in visual art, for example. Some works of art are about social issues or cultural issues. Some arts expressions are very accessible -- that is, it is relatively easy for the viewer or listener to understand what the artists were doing. Other works are highly intellectual and it might not be as easy for us to know readily what the artists were thinking about."

Questions the students might consider in their interpretation of a work of art could include the following:

- What is the work about?
- What does the object or performance mean to you?
- What is the theme or subject of the work?
- Did the art work have a story?
- Did the work evoke particular feelings or ideas?
- What images did you associate with the work?
- Why do you think the visual artist created the work?
- What does the work tell you about the artist's view of the world?

Depending on the goal of the work being addressed, different kinds of questions will be asked. Many pieces of art, for instance, do not tell stories. For these pieces, a question concerning the narrative would not be appropriate; nevertheless, students might still address the questions of the work's subject matter and the artist's motivation for creating it. For instance, the subject matter of some paintings is not representational. For these pieces, a theme question would not necessarily be pertinent, but

students might still address the questions of the work's substance and the artist's motivation. Students should be reminded that asking an artist about their goals for a certain piece is the only reliable approach to find out. Nonetheless, students will frequently encounter a variety of artistic expressions without any knowledge of the piece or an artist with whom to critique it. The piece is self-contained. They might nevertheless find it entertaining, make assumptions about its meaning, and develop their own opinions. They can put the knowledge they have gained from earlier experiences with the craft to use. During this stage, it is essential to establish an atmosphere of trust and respect for the individual and encourage students to express their own feelings and perceptions without fear of criticism. Students may have some difficulty with this step if they have not used a process similar to this previously. However, most students should have experienced this process through the Arts Education program in the elementary and middle years. The teacher needs to encourage students to express their individual feelings in a non-threatening fashion. Sometimes having the students write down their interpretations allows the students to express themselves without fear of peer-group pressure.

During the interpretation phase, students have the opportunity to clarify their ideas. They will discover that different points of view are possible because each student brings a unique set of life experiences and perspectives to the activity. Pupils will be able to think about possible interpretations from fresh angles.

Although students can reply to the work in a guided conversation, there are other ways that might help them better demonstrate their different perceptions. It makes sense to employ arts activities and tactics to help children explore, express, and communicate their many ideas when they are trying to explain and convey what they understand about a piece of art.

Students can express their interpretations in a number of different ways, including small group discussion, journal writing, poetry writing, debating, arts activities, etc.

In response to an arts expression, students might undertake the following:

- Collect and compare various associations they have with the work.
- Create tableaux in small groups to express interpretations of the art work. Tableau is a strategy

often used in drama, where the students create a "still picture" with their bodies.

- Create their own music composition in response to the work they have studied.
- Respond to a visual art work through expressive writing.
- Discuss the importance of context when interpreting the work.
- Discuss why an artist may have created this work. Does it fulfil a purpose, convey a message, promote a specific feeling, etc.? In role as a reporter, interview another student in role as the artist.
- Investigate how other artists created arts expressions in a similar fashion or with similar stimuli.
- Create visual images in response to the work; for example, compositions with similar theme, mood, rhythm, style, form.

**Step Six: Background Information** Students should be encouraged to learn as much as they can about the artists and the work at this point. Students can start their own research projects or the teacher can give them information. Remind students that there is a significant reason they are gathering this background data now rather than prior to the interpretation phase. An example of some remarks a teacher might give regarding background knowledge is shown below. Art should elicit thought from the observer. Your own creative thinking may be circumvented and your experience with artistic expression diminished if you are provided the idea or the solution before viewing the artwork. Art works can challenge you to explore new ideas or emotions, or perhaps to look at the world, movements and images, or listen to sounds in a way you've never experienced before. They can take your breath away with their beauty or disturb you with their ugliness. They can cause you to ask a brand new question that you've never thought of asking before. At the right time, written information is very useful. It can help you understand your response to an art work, it can help you understand the artist's intentions and it can lead you to more art works, just as reading a book you like can lead you to many more books. Students should be encouraged to find their own background information, if possible. Sometimes, due to lack of resources, it may be necessary for the teacher to provide the information to the class. Such information could include the following:

- Biographical information about the creator of the art work
- A look at the social, political and cultural climate of the times in which the arts expression was created
- A comparison between the current social and political climates and those of the time in which the work was first produced
- If the art work is an expression representative of a specific cultural group, a Look at the role of the work in relation to the historical and present day aspects of the culture or society
- A look at other art works by the same creators, or in the same style or culture (discuss similarities and differences)
- A reading of critics' reviews. After students have done some research about the work of art, teachers might ask questions such as the following:
  - How did your interpretation compare to what the artists or critics said about the work?
  - Were you surprised by anything you discovered? If so, what?
  - Do you think this is an accessible arts expression, or one that is difficult to understand? Explain your answer. Libraries and local and national arts institutions and organisations are good sources of information about artists and their work.

Visiting lecturers teaching History of art subject can be brought into the classroom at this stage to provide the students with information. An artist's visit and workshop or performance would be an excellent learning opportunity if it could be arranged.

This would be a good opportunity to start cross-cultural studies if the children have been reacting to a traditional piece of art. Students' comprehension of the work and the culture will be improved by knowledge about the art form itself, its cultural relevance, and its overall function. Students can talk about and share different cultural viewpoints.

#### Step Seven: Informed Judgement

One way to think of this stage is as a last, reflective exercise. Students will have to make some decisions about artistic expression. Students will consider the information they collected previously as they formulate their opinions about the artwork and its value. The process has given students the criteria they need to create an informed opinion. Keep track of any changes in their viewpoints and search for

terms that were used in their original opinions. If the students' impressions remain the same after examining and hearing alternative interpretations, they ought to be able to explain. Their discussions should include the following:

- The impact of the work, including the technical and expressive abilities of the artists or performers
- Whether the object or performance worked as a whole
- How the work compares to others in a similar style
- Whether the total experience, including sets, costumes or outfits, lighting, props, sound score and movements, contributed to the work
- How the work compares to other works of the same period
- Whether the message, if one can be identified, has significance for contemporary youth and/or others
- Whether the work conveyed the artist's intentions.

Ask students the following questions:

- Have your thoughts or feelings about the work changed since your first impression? If so, how have they changed? What made you change your mind? If not, can you now explain your first reaction to the work?
- Will you think about this work again? Do you think anything about it might stay in your memory?
- Have you seen or learned anything from this work that you might apply to your own arts expressions or your own thinking?

### III. SUMMARY OF THE RESPOND STEPS

Summary of the Steps

#### 1. Preparation

- The teacher establishes a climate for viewing or listening and provides a context for the experience.

#### 1. First Impressions

- Students share their spontaneous reactions to a work.
- Responses are influenced by the student's past experiences.
- There no wrong answers.

#### 1. Description

Students objectively describe what they saw and heard.

Students take inventory of what is in the arts expression.

Responses should be objective, not interpretive.

#### 1. Analysis

- Students attempt to discover what the various artists have done to achieve certain effects.

#### 1. Interpretation

Students try to figure out what the work is about.

- Students express what the work means to each of them, incorporating information from the two preceding steps.

#### 1. Background Information

- Students learn as much as they can about the work and the various artists involved with its creation.

#### 1. Informed Judgement

The students participate in a culminating and reflective activity.

- The students are asked to refer back to their first impressions and support their initial opinions of the work, or develop and support a new opinion.

### IV. CONVENIENCE SAMPLING OF AUDIENCE

Sample Testing: Responding To Art Expressions

"Starry Night Over The Rhone" - a painting by Dutch post-impressionist artist Vincent Van Gogh In September 1888, before his december breakdown that resulted in his hospitalisation in Arles, he painted Starry Night Over the Rhone. Working by night under a gas lamp, Van Gogh painted this work directly from nature. "It does me good to do what's difficult," Van Gogh wrote, "That doesn't stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the work-for religion-so I go outside at night to paint the stars.

Under the title Responding To Art Expressions a form was given to an art student. Response was collected from an art student of an graduate program college in Mumbai City.

What are your first thoughts about the work? List the first words which come to mind.

I've been allured by the beauty and the little journey of exploration that Van Gogh puts me by, in his painting- Starry Night over the Rhone.

The painting is lively and eye appealing. It makes me think how beautifully carved nature is, and how it wraps us around in happiness! It expresses a still moment of realisation and truth, gives me a homely feeling, I sense attachment, connection, stability, stillness and peace. The shining stars and deep shadows of the gas lights makes me want to have deep faith in people and other things. But the sudden feeling of things being temporary hits my head for an unknown reason.

First words that came to my mind were : nature, love, stars, velvet night sky, dark nights, glittering stars of hope, the fact of 'change' being the only thing that is permanent and somehow, the feeling of healing.

List words and/or phrases that describe what you see, as if you are making an inventory list. No personal opinions at this stage.

The list of things I see in this painting:

1. Dark night
2. Velvet sky
3. Shining stars
4. Deep reflections
5. a couple in love
6. The calm and still river
7. Gas lights

What has/have the artist(s) done to achieve the effects you described above? How have the various elements and principles been used? Use vocabulary you have learned that relates to this art form.

To achieve the effects described above, the artist-Victor Van Gogh has painted oil on canvas at that night itself. It mesmerises me and gives me a feeling to look at that place at night from his eyes.

According to me- the elements used (the stars, gas lights, reflection, the river, the couple. etc) are in harmony. But there are no principles of domination, subordination, isolation, no sense of focus, blurred perspective and there definitely is a lack of a wow factor. The sense of perfection of the moment makes the happening look a little artificial and mind made. The colour scheme in-spite of being soul soothing, could have still been better.

What do you think the work is about? What was/were the artist(s) trying to achieve? Use information from the preceding steps. What does this arts expression mean to you personally?

I think this neat piece of art is about the night being richer, fuller and more colourful than the day. It has an unusual beauty that the artist and I couldn't have resisted.

The artist, Van Gogh, according to me is trying to touch the innocence of the night, the depth of people's thoughts and arouse a feeling of stillness and a sense of slight perfection.

This art expression comforts me and cuddles me with a feeling of blissfulness and encourages me to positively see the glowing lights in the dark gloomy times.

What have you discovered about the work and the artist(s) involved in its creation or performance?

I have discovered that the artist has been able to make me see the beauty of a dark night from his

eyes. The feeling of liveliness adds cream to the cake. The sense of delivering his emotions comes out rightly too. The magical mystery and his eye for capturing the good before the bad is his way of work. Look back at your first impressions and support your initial opinions of the work based on your analysis and interpretation. If you have changed your mind since your first impressions, write down and support your new opinion. Consider the context of the art work (its time period, place of origin, purposed and cultural meaning) as part of your conclusion.

I would stick to my initial first impressions. Change, as we all know is permanent. But the beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. And, even after noticing its weak and negative edge, I still do have a likeness towards this painting (done in the 1880s and while being preoccupied by the 'night effects') and the expression he successfully conveys. The interpretation to me, is of holding on...on a dark night to see the glistening stars and to fill us up with a moment of happiness.

## V. CONCLUSION

Students' thinking becomes more serious when they are given the opportunity to share their thoughts about viewing an artwork. Through his masterwork, it provides an opportunity to see the inner depth of that specific artist. The student will benefit greatly from that observation in terms of application and the thought process he has acquired.

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