

Artful Thinking: The Elaboration Game

The Artful Thinking approach, designed by Project Zero at Harvard University, presents strategies that offer teachers ways to successfully engage students with the visual arts through the use of close observation and critical thinking skills. Another Artful Thinking strategy can be found in [this](#) lesson plan. You can also find out more about Project Zero and Artful Thinking Strategies [here](#).

The Elaboration Game encourages students to look deeply at a work of art. The goal is to facilitate careful observation and the ability to communicate effectively what is observed. After close observation provides a depth of information and insights, interpretation of what the student has seen is enhanced. Students will be asked to work in small groups to observe and then to build on those observations. Assessment can be through extended discussion or through writing.

Curricular Areas

English Language Arts, Visual Arts – Aesthetic Response

Grade Level

Adaptable to all grade levels

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.10](#)
- [CCRA.SL.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Speaking and Listening.CCRA.SL.4](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work
- Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase.

- [A Reading from Homer](#), 1885, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema
Artstor search: E1924-4-1



Carnival of Venice, 1946

Enrico Donati, American (born Italy)

Oil on canvas

40 x 50 inches (101.6 x 127 cm)

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Gift of Adele Donati, 2002

2002-87-1 © 2008 Estate of Enrico Donati

- *Carnival of Venice*, 1946, by Enrico Donati
Artstor search: 2002-87-1
- *The Rialto Bridge from the South*, c. 1736, by Michele Marieschi
Not available on Artstor

Lesson Process

PART I

1. Observe: View *A Reading from Homer*, looking quietly for a minute.
2. Select one student to identify a specific section of the painting, describing what he or she sees in this section only.
3. Select a second student to elaborate on the first person's observations—adding detail, but remaining within the specified section.
4. Have a third student add even more detail. Then a fourth person repeats the process. Keep in mind that the students should only describe what they see, and should not interpret the painting. By the time four students have completed this process, the class should have a very detailed view of this one section of the painting.
5. Now repeat the process with another section of the painting with four more students. Do this again for a third section of the painting or until all sections of the painting have been described.
6. At this point the students will have seen details in the painting they would never have expected. Discuss how they see the painting differently than when they first looked at it. Now you can lead students in an interpretation of the painting. What do they think of the choices the artist has made? What conclusions do they have about the painting, and how did they come to those conclusions.

PART II

The first painting was representational; however, the Elaboration Game is also effective with abstract works. View the painting *Carnival of Venice*, looking quietly for about a minute. Follow the same process as for the first painting. When you discuss and interpret as a class upon the conclusion of the elaborations, be sure to ask what students think is going on in the image. Continue asking for their interpretations, always questioning their reasons why they arrived at their interpretations. Discuss the value of the Elaboration Game when used for abstract art.

Assessment

1. Open the image *The Rialto Bridge from the South* so that the whole class can view it. As a class, decide how to break the painting into four sections (perhaps buildings to the left, buildings to the right, the bridge, the water). Each student writes a basic description of what he/she sees in one of the four sections, labeling the top of the paper with the section chosen. Have the student initial his/her work. Then pass papers to another student. The students complete the first elaboration of the chosen section, again, adding their initials. Papers are passed again for the second elaboration, and again for the third elaboration. At the end, each student will have completed all four steps, although not always on the same section of the painting.

2. Assign students the task of describing the possible benefits of the Elaboration Game, both as a way of understanding works of art and as a way of understanding other topics or issues.

Enrichment

1. Students can use the process and philosophy of the Elaboration Game to create techniques for other topics or problems. For example, use a version of the Elaboration Game to resolve conflicts, or to better understand a complex character or difficult novel. How can the techniques of the Elaboration Game be adapted to understand a scientific process?