

ISABELLA
SEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

“Thinking Through Art”

Research Study Details

“Thinking Through Art” was conducted at the Gardner Museum over the course of three years, beginning in 2003, using a quasi-experimental design to assess the effectiveness of the museum’s *School Partnership Program* in developing critical thinking skills. The study’s hypothesis was that there is a strong positive relationship between participation in art museum multiple-visit programs and student development of critical thinking skills. To test this, researchers compared the ways in which program students and non-program students talked about art.

Student data was collected in both the school and museum context. In the school context, students in grades 3-5 were recorded as they talked about an art poster. To capture student conversation in the museum setting a technique developed by Institute for Learning Innovation researchers called the “untour” was used. Unlike traditional museum tours led either by museum or school staff, the “untour” allows students to follow their own interests and to choose what works of art they want to discuss without adult intervention. At the Gardner, groups of 6 students at a time were taken to a gallery and each outfitted with a clip-on microphone leading to a small digital recorder in a fanny pack. Students were asked to simply talk out loud as they explored the gallery, either individually or in conversation with other students. Both the poster interviews and the “untours” were then transcribed and studied by the research team using a critical thinking skills rubric that was developed specifically for this project. Researchers also analyzed test scores from both the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Stanford-9 tests.

A major challenge posed in the “Thinking Through Art” project was how to articulate and measure critical thinking skills. What exactly does thinking look like in the context of an art museum? To answer this question, Gardner Museum education staff worked with project researchers to develop a rubric for critical thinking skills relevant to works of art. Drawing on current thinking in the education world, Housen’s work, and data from the teachers and students in the *School Partnership Program*, the project team created a rubric that identifies seven primary skills that students use in their discussions of artworks:

- **Observing:** Noticing specific features of a work of art – *i.e.*, “*It looks kind of dark. The clouds are red so it looks like sunset is coming.*”
- **Interpreting:** Developing a narrative about who the people in a work of art are, what kinds of emotions they show, and what activities they are engaged in – *i.e.*, “*A woman has been killed and she’s getting buried. And all the people, they’re all sad because one of them is crying.*”
- **Evaluating:** Expressing personal opinions about a work of art – *i.e.*, “*If I painted it, I’d probably be amazed with myself – like whoa, I have this much art inside of me!*”
- **Associating:** Using personal experience or prior knowledge as a basis for understanding a work of art – *i.e.*, “*I can tell that there’s a servant because he has a thing on his hair like lunch ladies wear, the hair net.*”
- **Problem-Finding:** Looking for information, or generating questions based on puzzling or interesting aspects of art objects – *i.e.*, “*I’m wondering why the guy on the right has a shell on his coat because we don’t wear shells on our coats.*”
- **Comparing:** Noticing similarities and differences between works of art – *i.e.*, “*They kind of look alike, but you can tell that they’re different because one has long hair and the one has short hair. And the other one has different armor and the other one has another sort of armor, so maybe they’re different kinds of people or like a tribe or something like that.*”
- **Flexible Thinking:** Remaining open to multiple possibilities – *i.e.*, “*She might be a maid because of the way her hair’s tied up, but she might also not be a maid because of the way she dresses.*”

In addition to identifying these seven critical thinking skills, the rubric includes an evidence scale. Most educators agree that providing clear and compelling evidence for ideas is an essential part of critical thinking. Rather than making it a separate category, Gardner Museum educators found that it made more sense to show it as an overarching habit of mind, since it can be exercised in any of the categories – *i.e.*: “*The people that live there in that palace are probably very wealthy because there’re a lot of gold things around.*”

Additional details and statistics available by request and in the full “Thinking Through Art” research report..

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