AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO LOOKING AT ART (OR ANYTHING!)

Observe, Describe, Interpret, Prove

Careful noticing is a foundation of critical thinking. This document outlines a process to help learners of all ages slow down, closely observe, resist initial assumptions, develop theories based on multiple points of evidence, and justify interpretations. These habits characterize "thinking like an artist," and are foundations of depth, complexity, empathy, and innovation in any field.

To use this critical thinking protocol, you will need an object students are likely unfamiliar with. This could be a work of art, a poem, a historical document, a scientific photograph, an item from nature, or anything that might pique student curiosity. It is important to withhold any identifying information about the object until students have had ample time to investigate using the protocol. Facts or expert interpretations limit student curiosity and interest in "figuring out."

ODIP WITH STUDENTS

ODIP is a critical thinking routine developed by the Columbus Museum of Art. ODIP is used with visitors of all ages, and teachers have adapted it for everything from looking at student art in early elementary to studying ancient Greek literature in high school. ODIP provides a routine for resisting assumptions, noticing carefully, describing thoroughly, making connections, and reasoning with evidence.

ODIP stands for observe, describe, interpret, prove.

1) **OBSERVE: Ask students to SILENTLY observe for one minute.**
   What do you see?
   What information is there?

   HINT: Tell students these should be things you would be able to "put your finger on."

2) **DESCRIBE: Ask students to share what they see—not yet what they think is happening. Students should elaborate and describe observations.**
   How might you explain this work of art or object to someone on the phone?
   What descriptive words come to mind?
   What details could you provide?
   What do you notice that no one else might have noticed?

   HINT: People tend to immediately interpret what they are seeing. It is very important that at this step, learners only describe only what they see, not what they think is happening. If students share interpretations at this stage, you can tell them, "I see that you are theorizing about what might be happening. Let's save those ideas for later, once we've noticed and described lots of elements."

3) **INTERPRET: Ask student to consider their observations, descriptions, connections, and imagine a story or narrative based on the identified details.**
What do you think might be happening in this work of art? (Or, what function might this object serve?)
What might the creator's intentions be?
What might the story be?
Who might use this object and why?

HINT: Using conditional language here (i.e. "What might…") reinforces that there are many valid interpretations, and that it is important to share many, diverse possibilities – and to consider those interpretation in relation to the descriptions given in the previous stage. Be transparent with students that you are not looking for a singular answer, by many possibilities that emerge from the details they have noticed.

4) PROVE: Ask students to back up their ideas or interpretation using details from the work.
What makes you say that?
What clues did you use to come to that theory?

HINT: Remind students of the observations that led to their interpretations. Ask them to *really* consider what specifics led them to those conclusions. Explain to students that this process of looking closely for as many clues as possible, making connections, theorizing, and reasoning, is how experts make discoveries in any field.

VARIATIONS FOR THE (NON-ART) CLASSROOM:
Closely analyzing works of art builds important skills for thinking in any discipline. Moreover, art works are rich with cultural, historical, and social clues. Here are some other ways to use ODIP to support deep thinking:

1. A high school intern at CMA brought the ODIP protocol to her government class, in order to critically consider protest photos. Her teacher now uses the strategy with photographs, political cartoons, and other media.
2. A classical history instructor leads her students through ODIP using paintings that depict scenes from ancient literature. This help students engage with and understand complex texts. The same protocol can then be used on excerpts from the text.
3. Science teachers have used ODIP with "mystery objects," unfamiliar equipment, objects from nature, and photos from space in order to increase curiosity, careful investigation, and other habits of scientific thinking
4. Social studies teachers use historical photographs of people and industry to explore transformations in the economy and society.