Cindy Phillips, Spring 2025

Webinar Reflection: How to Talk About Art: Leading a Student Dialogue that Supports Diversity Awareness (Grades 6-12)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk85mYQm770

I chose this webinar because the title suggested the most potential connection to what I teach. It seemed the least "art-y," if that makes sense, and I felt it might offer ideas that I could realistically apply in my STEM classroom.

As I watched, I jotted down the ideas that resonated most…ideas that aren't just important for interpreting art, but also deeply relevant to STEM instruction. I actually found the whole webinar inspiring, even though not everything directly applies to my own classroom. It opened my eyes to how art teachers, art historians, or history teachers who use visual art analysis can promote critical thinking. That's something I'd never considered before. In math, we're usually told that developing critical thinking is *our* job.

Key Takeaways

1. Create a Safe Environment

(Approx. 8:03)
The presenters discussed setting norms and guidelines for classroom discussions, emphasizing that strategies should be adapted to the nature of your students. They acknowledged that each class is different and that this diversity requires flexibility. This resonated deeply with me. As teachers, we know our students best. I often teach the same course multiple times a day, and the interactions in each section can look completely different… based on class level, personalities, or even time of day. And that's okay. Learning doesn't have to *look* a certain way to be meaningful.

2. Consider Your Role as a Teacher

(Approx. 9:45)
Something that really stuck out to me was the idea that even where you stand or how you look at students during discussions can express (unintentional) bias. The presenter suggested looking away or at a piece of paper during discussions to avoid influencing student opinions. I often walk away when a student speaks so that the focus stays on them, not me. Sometimes I pretend to not pay attention during problem-solving to encourage peer collaboration. To an outsider, this might look like disengagement, but I believe that, done with intention, shifts ownership to the students.

They also advised against paraphrasing student responses. Instead, support students by **pointing to** what they're referencing. And while the presenter recommends staying neutral, even when a student is wrong, I tend to allow the misconception to sit for a bit, as long as it's productive, so students can correct it themselves. Eventually, though, I step in. In math, too much lingering in error can cause confusion or shake students' trust in me.

3. Embrace Wonder

(Around 20:00)
The idea of *wonder* really stood out. In ELA classes, I remember being asked, “What does this imagery mean?” or “What do you think the author was trying to say?” But even then, it felt like there was a *right* answer. I recall a teacher claiming that apples always symbolize original sin. That kind of “correct answer” never sat right with me. What if the artist just liked apples? Are we sure the interpretation is accurate? Who told me teacher that, and was I really expected to believe this?!

This webinar reminded me how valuable it is to let students *wonder*. That’s something I should incorporate more in math. Asking open-ended questions, allowing curiosity to guide thinking; that’s where deep and long-lasting learning happens.

4. Introduce the Familiar and the Unfamiliar

The presenters mentioned that learning thrives in the space between what’s known and unknown, a concept that aligns with Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development*. I loved the reminder to live in the space between the known and unknown, to balance comfort and challenge. This idea plays out in math every day…students need just enough familiarity to feel confident, and just enough novelty to stretch their thinking.

5. Focus on Supporting Evidence

The idea of grounding opinions in visual evidence, something common in art interpretation, is incredibly relevant to STEM. In both, students must justify their reasoning. Whether it’s analyzing a painting or defending a mathematical solution, students are practicing the same critical skill: evidence-based reasoning.

6. Encourage Multiple Perspectives

(Approx. 30:00)
The presenters showed a racially charged image from the 1970s and encouraged students to imagine the thoughts of the people depicted. To me, it was a great and safe way to open discussions about race, history, and identity without explicitly stating that to the students. Different students will naturally have different perspectives, and when the classroom feels safe, the discussions from those perspectives can open doors.

While such topics may not arise in a math classroom, the *principle* still applies. We need to create spaces where students feel safe sharing diverse approaches and interpretations. Even in math, different problem-solving methods should be welcomed and respected.

7. “Do We All Agree?” Maybe That’s Not the Point

At the end, the presenter warned against the phrase “Do we all agree?” because agreement might not be the goal in art analysis. That struck a chord (pun intended) with me. In math, while there’s usually a correct answer, there isn’t just *one* correct method. I often encourage students to trust their instincts and approach problems in the way that makes the most sense to them. If they get the same answer as someone else, chances are they're on the right track.

Unfortunately, time constraints don’t allow for a full discussion of every approach. So, I rely on small group interactions to give students feedback and support. But this reminded me that even

when we don't have time to celebrate every path to a solution, acknowledging that multiple valid approaches exist is still critical.

Final Thoughts
This webinar expanded my view of what critical thinking looks like in different disciplines. It reminded me that teaching is not about conforming to a single mode of instruction but about being responsive to our students, encouraging curiosity, and supporting their development as independent thinkers, whether through art or algebra.

Questions I chose to answer based on this webinar:

How can art help us understand different perspectives and cultures?

Art gives us a way to see the world through someone else's eyes. It shows us different perspectives and cultures without needing a lot of background knowledge. You just look, wonder, and start asking questions. In a classroom with students from all different backgrounds, this can be super powerful. One student might see something in a piece of art that others never would've noticed, just because of their own experiences. And when they share that, everyone else gets to learn something not just about the art, but about each other. It's a great way to build understanding and connection without forcing it.

How can we as teachers use visual images to influence our opinions, social norms, and cultural ideals? (I changed the question a bit)

I have seen that art teachers can use visual images to start conversations that go deeper than just art. Showing students different kinds of images can help them question and better understand their beliefs. It can be a gentle way to gently bring in conversations about social norms and cultural ideals without specifically asking about them. And when students from different backgrounds share what they see in an image, it opens the door to them seeing the world and each other in a new way that can leave a powerful impression long after the class is over.

Can we truly have objective interpretations of artworks, or is interpretation always subjective?

I think interpretation is mostly subjective. People bring their own background, culture, and experiences into how they see a piece of art. But that doesn't mean there wasn't an objective intention behind it. Just like in math, students might have different approaches or ideas about what a problem is asking, but usually there's one correct answer the problem was designed to lead them to. I think it's the same with art…an artist probably had a specific message or meaning in mind when they created the work. We might not always know exactly what that was, but it doesn't mean it wasn't there. So I think our interpretations are subjective, but that doesn't cancel out the possibility of an original objective meaning.