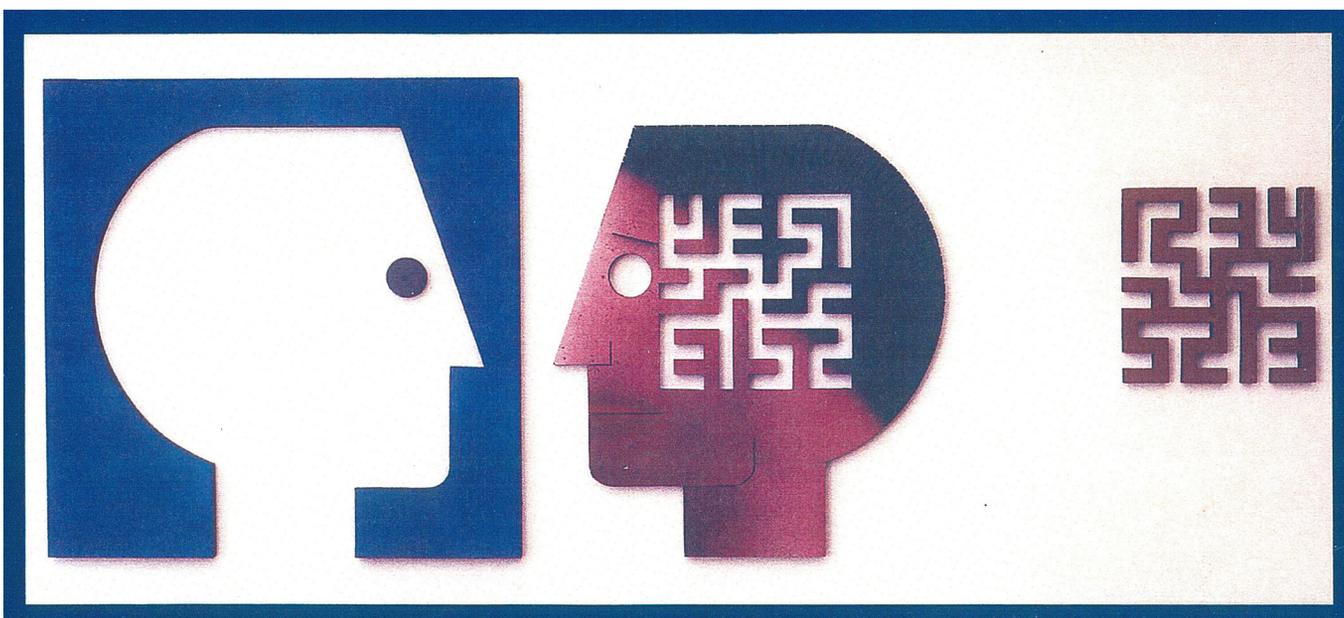


# Responding to Arts Expressions

Supporting Arts Education

September 2009



Introduction.....	2
Classroom Climate .....	2
Preparation and Background Information .....	3
Approaches and Responding Strategies .....	4
Formal Criticism Approach .....	5
Creative Approach.....	7
Contextual Approach.....	7
Multi-connection Approach .....	9
Responding to Student Work .....	11
Sample Checklist for Evaluating Students' Responses to Arts Expressions .....	12

# Responding to Arts Expressions

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Ron McLellan  
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1988



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## Introduction

Responding to arts expressions is an important part of arts education. Viewing and listening are discovery processes that require critical and creative thinking in order to develop deep understanding of the arts. Throughout their arts education experiences, students are encouraged on a regular basis to respond actively to a wide range of art works from each of the four strands including dance, drama, music, and visual art. Students are also engaged in responding to films and other interdisciplinary forms of art.

There are many ways for classes, small groups, and individual students to respond to works of art. Students might be asked to respond:

- verbally
- in writing
- through research or contextual inquiry
- through the creation of their own artistic expressions related to the original work.

It is important that teachers and students keep in mind that different people respond in different ways to the same arts expression due to personal experiences and cultural associations.

## Classroom Climate

As each student's perspectives are personal and varied, an atmosphere of trust and respect must be established. Students should be able to express their own opinions and ideas, knowing that unique viewpoints are valued and will enhance other students' experiences, and that the opinions and perspectives of others are to be respected in return.

Before class discussion or other responding activities begin, teachers may remind students that not everybody will or should like all art works. But no matter what students decide about a particular arts expression, they should be willing to give each work some thought and base their opinions on sound criteria.

It is important to remember that when students are responding to an art work or performance, there is no single right answer. Attitude, however, is important. When responding to a new work of art, viewers and/or listeners are to assume that the artist had a reason for creating the work. Students should try to see, hear, and understand everything that they can. In the end, their opinion of an art work is valid if they can support their opinion with reasons and knowledge.

## Preparation and Background Information

Preparing students for interaction with a work of visual art, or with a dance, drama, or music performance can pique the students' interest and heighten the value of their viewing/listening experience. Teachers also need to prepare themselves for the experience by gathering background information on the work and artists, and by planning appropriate introductory and follow-up activities for students.

### Teacher Preparation

Many works of art are not intended specifically for an audience of children or adolescents. To help students interact meaningfully with works that are sometimes challenging for knowledgeable adults, teachers require adequate background information to know how best to present questions, structure activities, and adapt information to the developmental level of students.

### Preparing Students

While many students may lack specific background information about the artists, the history of the arts, or contemporary artistic practices, students bring to the responding process their own life experiences, intuition, ideas, and critical and creative thinking abilities. Students can use their existing knowledge, the ideas of the other students, research information, and the aesthetic qualities within the work itself to formulate responses. Idea-based arts expressions require both teacher and student to think and expand his or her existing knowledge.

The preparation information can be brief. Responding to the arts is a discovery process. Students learn from the works and discover concepts that can be investigated further at the appropriate time. This is a good opportunity to remind students that we all respond to the same arts expression in different ways. Our cultural perspectives and past experiences influence our responses.

When preparing students, teachers could focus on the following:

- the form or style of the arts expression (e.g., in dance – ballet, jazz, social)
- brief biographical information about the artists involved (e.g., the choreographer, dancers, composer, visual artists, actors)
- 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 (e.g., cultural biases or the student's past experiences with the arts)

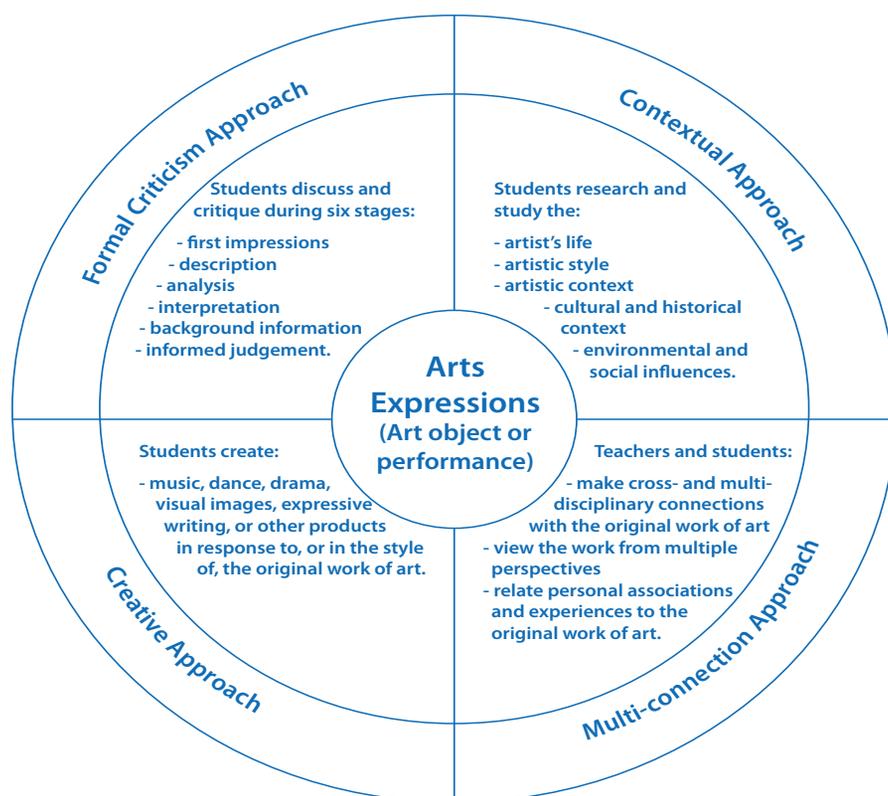
- arts activities that introduce students to the upcoming event, presentation, or performance (e.g., prior to viewing a narrative dance performance, students could create a narrative dance composition, or prior to viewing a play, the class could take a brief look at the basic ingredient of all drama – conflict – and at the dramatic structure of plays).

## Approaches and Responding Strategies

Several arts educators and authors have devised different approaches for engaging students in examining, discussing, critiquing, and responding creatively to arts expressions.

Teachers need to familiarize themselves with the arts expression that the students will be examining in order to determine the most appropriate approach.

In helping students respond to arts expressions, a formal lock-step approach is not encouraged. Rather, a flexible and adaptable approach that takes into account the students' prior experiences and the context of the arts expression is advised.



Teachers may find that some works lend themselves to a formal critical analysis and interpretation, while other works may be best approached through examination of the work's cultural and historical context. Students might also create a web or graphic map listing multiple connections associated with the arts expression that will encourage

further exploration. At other times, teachers may forego the more formal critiques or contextual studies and have students respond by making their own art works in a style or manner related to the original. It is important to remember that student responses need not always be in verbal or written form. At times, teachers may wish to use two or more of the four suggested approaches to respond to the same performance or visual art work.

Following are descriptions of four approaches that teachers may use to engage students in responding in any of the four strands of arts education.

### Formal Criticism Approach

Critics, like everyone else, view the world through various lenses. Students need to be taught that criticism involves more than the expression of personal taste. They need to learn that one role of the critic is to point out what is meaningful or valuable in the work so that others may also think about these issues and ideas. Critics are concerned not only about the strengths and weaknesses of a work of art, but also consider interpretations of ideas that the artists have expressed. Even very young students can respond to arts expressions critically if guided by teachers using appropriate questions at each stage of discussion.

One of the most familiar and widely used methods for critiquing visual art in education is Edmund Burke Feldman's four-phase process that he refers to as the critical process. This process includes the categories of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement. A detailed account of Feldman's process for visual art critiques may be found in numerous sources listed in the References section of this document including Feldman 1981, 1985, 1994, 1996. Consult Feldman's writings for specific information on his process for critiquing visual art. The work of several authors has been adapted in this document to create the following six-stage process to help students conduct formal critiques in any art form.

Students can work through the critiquing process in one large group, in small groups, or individually. The teacher could also set up learning centre activities using the six stages.

### Stage One: First Impressions

Sometimes the initial impact of a work is so powerful that there is a need to express a first impression. Including this stage gives students the opportunity to air or record their first spontaneous reaction to an arts expression.

Some students will change their first impressions; some will not. There are no set expectations either way. You can elicit students' 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 that immediately come to mind. Encourage students to avoid simple value judgements such as good or bad.

Record students' impressions on chart paper or have students keep track themselves. Remember there are no wrong answers if the responses are sincere and are based on evidence in the arts expression.

### Stage Two: Description

Consider this stage as taking inventory, similar to taking inventory in a store. You want to come up with a list of everything the students see or hear in the work. The key here is to stick to facts. (For example, "I hear a lot of high rapid notes" or "I see a red circle"). It is premature at this stage to assign meaning to what is seen or heard, so if the students seem to be focusing on one idea, image, or element, say something like, "Keep track of that thought for later. For now, let's see how many different things we can come up with for our list."

It might help to suggest to students that they keep their descriptions simple. It is not necessary at this stage to try to figure out how the choreographer, composer, dramatic artists, or visual artist has manipulated the elements. Students are simply describing their observations.

Do not spend a lot of time on the description stage. Its purpose is limited; it is simply a way to get students to note as much as they can before moving on to analysis and interpretation.

### Stage Three: Analysis

At the analysis stage, students try to figure out what the artist or artists have done to achieve certain effects. Students can discuss the artist's use of the elements, principles, materials, and concepts specific to the art form. Students might want to refer back to their first impressions here. For example, if a student's first impression was that a piece of music was lively, s/he can now analyze how the various elements in the work made it sound that way.

The following questions can be asked to get students thinking and talking at this stage:

- How is the composer, choreographer, dramatic artist, or visual artist using the elements or principles that we have been learning?
- What grabs your attention in the work?
- Do you see any connections between or among the things you listed during the description stage?
- What do you think the artist worked particularly hard at while he or she did this work?
- What "qualities" do you hear or see in this work (e.g., strong repeated rhythm, rapid and slow movements of the upper body, dripping paint, sloppy or messy lines).

Encourage the students to identify how the individual elements and principles have been used, and how they relate to each other. During analysis, students can also sum up the overall characteristics of the work. Although associations and perspectives play a role in analysis, it is important to focus on the evidence found in the arts expression. At this stage, we are looking at how the artists are using and manipulating various elements, principles, sounds, movements, words, images, or ideas rather than moving to personal interpretation.

If students begin to interpret (e.g., "I think the dance is about having fun in the summer"), suggest that they keep track of that thought for the next stage. For now, encourage students to concentrate on how the artists have manipulated or focused attention on specific elements, principles, instruments, movements, materials, or images.

### Stage Four: Interpretation

Interpretation is the stage where the students' own perspectives, associations, and experiences meet with "the evidence" found in the arts expression. A number of questions can be asked by teachers and students at this stage:

- What do you think is the theme or subject of the work (if there is one)?
- Why do you think the choreographer, composer, playwright, or visual artist created this work?
- What does the work mean?
- In your opinion, what is the artist's view of the world?

Students can express their interpretations in a number of different ways: small group sharing and discussion, journal writing, poetry writing, and arts activities are examples. The teacher can ask students if the work reminds them of anything such as a colour or a memory, for example.

As in the "first impressions" stage of the formal criticism approach, when it comes to interpretation, there are no wrong answers. Students should, however, be encouraged to go beyond free association; personal interpretation evolves as the viewer combines associations and concrete evidence found in the work.

### Stage Five: Background Information

This is a stage where students benefit from encouragement to find out as much about the work and the artist as they can. The teacher can provide information or the students can embark on research projects.

Individuals and organizations within the arts community are good sources of information about the arts and artists. For example, many galleries have exhibition catalogues that provide artists' statements, and biographical and critical information. Guests can be brought into the classroom at this stage to provide the students with information. An artist's visit provides an excellent opportunity if it can be arranged.

In summary, what the students explore at this stage may range from reading an artist's statement to embarking on a major research or inquiry project.

### Stage Six: Informed Judgement

This stage can be looked at as a reflective activity. Have the students return to their first impressions. Ask them the following questions:

- Have your thoughts or feelings about the work changed since your first impressions?
- If so, how have they changed?
- What made you change your mind?
- If not, can you now explain your first reaction?

You might ask students if the work reminds them of any other works of art seen or heard. Have students learned anything about the work that they might apply to their own work?

Although the six-stage process described might seem complicated at first, it will come easily once the teacher and students become familiar with the stages.

### Creative Approach

Students can respond directly to works of art through the creation of their own arts expressions. Students might create individual narratives, small group interrelated arts projects, journal writings, poetry writings, dance interpretations, visual interpretations, musical interpretations, dramatic interpretations, thematically or stylistically related works, and so on.

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

- create their own arts expression in a style similar to the art work to which they are responding
- collect and compare various associations with the work, and interpret these personal associations in students' own way
- create tableaux in small groups to express interpretations of the art work, music, dance, or drama (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 an expressive writing activity

- create a dance based on a similar theme or idea
- brainstorm a number of possible subjects, themes, or moods students associate with the work, and create their own work on a similar topic
- create musical compositions, dances, visual images, or contextual dramas in response to the work (e.g., compositions with similar theme, mood, rhythm, style, form).

### Contextual Approach

In this approach, students begin by developing an understanding of the context of the work to which they will be responding. Discuss with students the importance of understanding cultural and historical context when viewing or listening to a work of art. Consider why an artist may have created various works of art during different historical periods and in different cultural environments. Does it fulfil a specific purpose, convey a message, represent a school of thought, or evoke feelings?

The contextual approach can provide opportunities for teachers to incorporate accurate cultural information and inquiry-based research that can add depth and meaning to the experiences. Students might begin by discovering the art works' historical, social, or artistic environment or by examining the artists' cultural or biographical background.

Contextual information can help students understand their response to a work of art. It can also help them understand the artist's intentions and can lead students to discover more art works, just as reading a book can lead to reading many more books.

Students may conduct their own inquiry-based research, or teachers might support the following:

- biographical information about the creator(s) of the arts expression
- an inquiry into the social, political, and cultural climate of the time in which the arts expression was created
- a comparison between arts expressions of today and those of previous eras

- an examination of the role of the work in relation to historical and current contexts, if the art work is representative of a specific cultural group
- a look at arts expressions by the same creators or others in a similar style (discuss similarities and differences)
- an examination of other works created at the same time
- a look at the expectations and moods of audiences during the work's earlier years
- a summary of critics' reviews.

After students have done some research about the work of art, teachers might ask questions such as:

- What interesting things did you learn about the artists' lives and works of art?
- If created in the past, how were the artists' lives different than how people live today?
- In what ways do you agree or disagree with what the artists or critics said about the work?
- Were you surprised by anything you discovered? If so, what?
- In role as a reporter, interview another student in role as the artist, composer, playwright, or choreographer examining the cultural and historical context in which the artist lived.

Challenge students to identify possible research questions and find their own contextual information. Sometimes, due to lack of resources, it may be necessary for the teacher to provide the information to the class. Encourage students to use the Internet to access information and to contact experts in the community and online.

Libraries and local, provincial, and national arts institutions and organizations are good sources of information about artists and their work. Refer to Arts Education Core Learning Resources and Additional Learning Resources documents in the 'Curriculum and Related Documents' area of the Ministry of Education website for addresses of several community organizations that may be able to assist with gathering background information. Duplication rights have been purchased for numerous arts DVDs that are listed in the resource lists. Contact local art galleries, theatres, arts councils, performing arts associations, and arts education and artists' organizations for assistance in obtaining information about artists and their work.

It is important to communicate with guest artists in advance to plan how their visits can help to achieve specific arts education outcomes and to decide how best to integrate the artist's visits into the sequence of lessons within the unit(s) of instruction. As a follow-up, students can create or perform their own work in response to artists' visits.

If the students have been responding to a traditional work of art, this would be an opportune time to embark on cross-cultural studies. It is important that teachers and students focus on the authenticity of the cultural information they obtain, consulting an authority on the culture involved in the study. Information about the arts expression itself, its cultural significance, and the role of the arts in general enhances the students' understanding of the work and of the culture. Students can discuss and exchange varying cultural and personal perspectives using this approach.

## Multi-connection Approach

Teachers may decide to use a multi-connection approach by creating a web or graphic map to list responses, generate ideas, and plan related activities and inquiry-based research.

Graphic organizers such as webs or maps may be used to list student responses and related arts concepts and to aid in planning for extensions to those responses. Students may also be involved with the teacher in construction of these organizers. The organizers may be used to initiate and to guide the exploration and discovery of topics and concepts related to the art work.

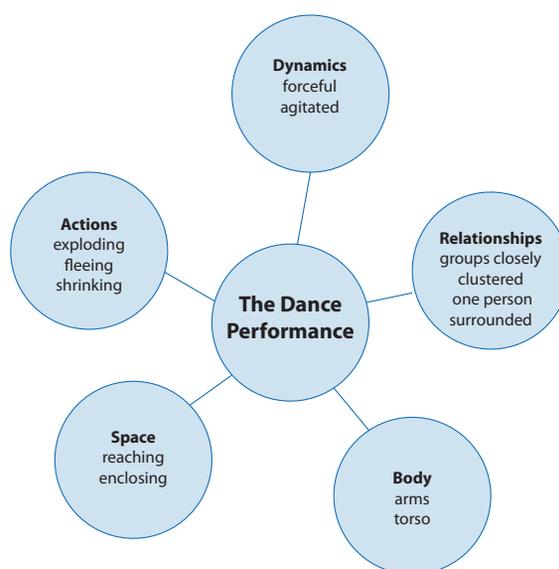
The arts expression to which students are responding may be placed at the centre of the map or may appear as one part of a larger conceptual focus or theme. Related sub-topics may be generated using a brainstorming process or associative list of ideas.

Multiple connections to the original arts expression may be made within one arts education strand, among several strands, or across broad themes including several subject areas. Following development of the maps, several of the ideas can be selected for exploration.

### Example: Student Responses to a Dance Performance

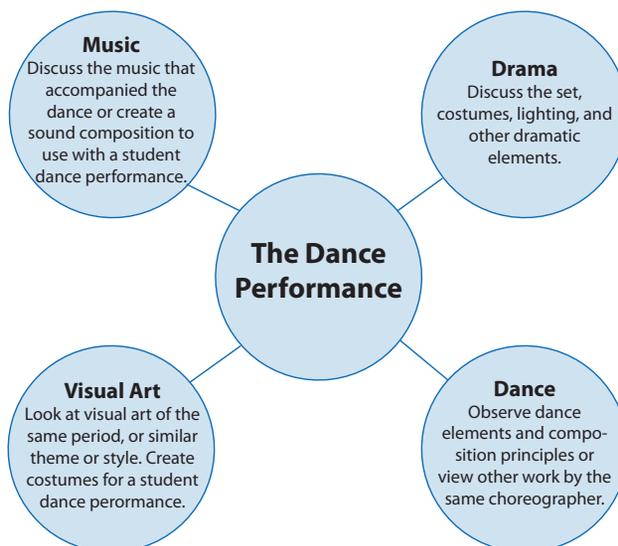
#### A. Multi-connections within one strand (i.e., dance)

Students are responding to a dance performance by making multiple connections among the elements, principles, and concepts of the art form itself. For example, in the map below, students may discuss and explore through movement how the actions and dynamics are related to each other.



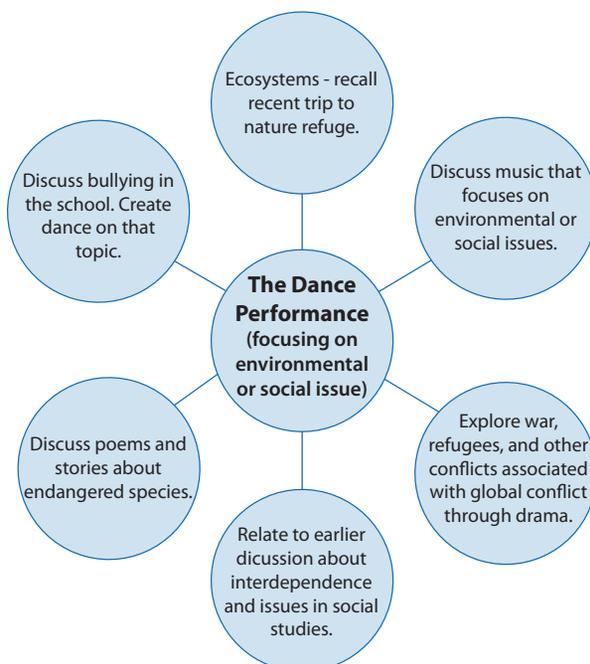
## B. Multi-connections among strands

Students are responding to a dance performance by making connections among two or more art forms.



## C. Multi-connections among topics or themes

Students are responding to a dance performance by making connections to learning within other subject areas and personal experiences. Students conduct explorations or inquiries in other areas of study to deepen understanding of the original work.



## Responding to Student Work

Students responding to their own and their peers' work is an important part of the creative and evaluative process.

Responding can occur during the creative process as works are in progress or at the end of the project. Encouraging response to works in progress helps students refine their arts expressions.

Portfolios include reflections on works in progress as well as on completed projects. Refer to the Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning section of the curriculum documents for more information about portfolio assessment and portfolio conferences. Should a teacher wish to encourage self-evaluation, questions that will encourage thoughtful responses need to be provided.

Responding to their peers' work is a learning and growing experience for students when it does not include personal judgement. Students may feel particularly vulnerable when performing their work as it is they who are being watched or heard. This is different from the presentation of a professional arts expression which allows for some distance between the student and art work. In order to maintain objectivity, all comments must be kept to observations about the ideas expressed, sounds, instruments, images, movements, use of elements, and principles. Comments which judge the person should be discouraged. For example, the comment "I like Stacy's composition" would be better said as "I thought the rhythm really added a lot to the composition". Before the discussion begins, be sure to establish some general rules of conduct, demonstrating some sample student comments.

Record on audio or video tape students' works-in-progress and final presentations. To help facilitate the responding process, the recordings can be replayed several times during the process to allow students time for deeper reflection. Recordings of works in progress can be compared to final products to see how the work has changed.

Naturally, teachers need to use a level of questioning to suit the needs and abilities of students. As students become more comfortable responding to their own work, questions that encourage new ways of revising or extending the work can be posed. Teachers are responsible for establishing a trusting atmosphere well before any judgement is allowed, and students need to be reminded to stress the positive in each piece of work. When working in groups, encourage the co-operative reworking of a piece to ensure the intention of the group that created it is ultimately realized. Summative comments or judgements on the work always focus on whether the work has achieved the student's intended purpose.

Students will have interpretations and opinions about their own and their peers' work. It is important, however, that students base their opinions and interpretations on evidence seen and heard in the work itself. These interpretations and opinions must be assessed on the student's ability to express and justify them, and not on the student's ability to conform to the norm or to the opinions of the teacher.

A Sample Checklist for Evaluating Students' Responses to Arts Expressions is provided on the following page. Teachers may select from the list or add to the possible criteria when assessing students' responses to their own work. The checklist can be used to assess several students in one period or one student on different dates.

## Sample Checklist for Evaluating Students' Responses to Arts Expressions

<b>Examples of Possible Criteria</b>							
Offers first impressions about the arts expression							
Asks compelling questions that lead to further inquiry							
Contributes to discussion and other activities that elicit student responses							
Uses observation skills when giving descriptions of the work							
Demonstrates critical thinking when analyzing the work							
Makes observations and comparisons, and identifies significant factors appropriate to the work							
Applies prior learning to personal responses							
Uses appropriate vocabulary							
Analyzes based on the evidence found in the work							
Uses knowledge obtained through analysis to interpret the work							
Identifies images, sensations, or ideas evoked by the work							
Considers several interpretations							
Offers personal perspectives and interpretations of the work							
Researches and gathers background information about the work							
Demonstrates reflective thinking							
Supports opinions based on information and evidence found in the work							
Shows interest in arts discussions							
Challenges self							
Describes whether, how, and why first impressions may have changed after critical thinking and/or discussion							
Contributes ideas when working in groups							
Works co-operatively if working in a group							
Works independently							
<b>Comments:</b>							