

Fostering critical response to complex experience

Critical Response Card

During the [CAPACOA conference in Toronto](#), I attended a fantastic workshop on the ‘[Critical Response Protocol](#)’ — a process developed to encourage reflection, connection, and inclusion in group discussions about artworks, texts, lessons, performances, or any other complex shared experience. Facilitators Judy Harquail and Tim Yerxa had been trained in the protocol, and talked us through it after we had all experienced a performance work by [Tara Cheyenne Friedenber](#)g.

Developed and refined by the [Perpich Center for Arts Education](#) in Minnesota, the Critical Response Protocol is deceptively straightforward. It defines a timed list of questions/discussions that any facilitator can use with a learning group (post-show audience discussion, classroom reflection, book club, whatever). The facilitator does not need to be an expert in the content of the discussion, but does need to follow the guidelines of the protocol. They are there to guide the process and set the tone, not to lecture or expound or correct. So, with some preparation, any staff member, board member, or even audience member could lead the process.

In brief (a [two-sided PDF describing the protocol](#) is available for the details), the facilitator welcomes the group and introduces the process, explaining that “we can better understand any complex work or experience when we slow down and first pay attention to what we notice, remember, feel, and wonder about it.” And then the prompting questions begin:

1. What did you notice? (10 minutes)

Encouraging participants to share what they saw or heard during the experience, without judgment. If judgment emerges, the facilitator asks for the evidence upon which that judgment was based: “What did you see that makes you say that?”

2. What did it remind you of? (10 minutes)

Encouraging participants to share how they can connect the work to their own life, what they recalled when they experienced it.

3. How did you or do you feel? (10 minutes)

Sharing what feelings the work evoked in them, or continues to evoke.

4. What questions does it raise? (10 minutes)

What does the experience make you wonder about?

5. Speculate (10 minutes)

Asking the group to speculate about what the work helps them to understand, or what they think was the artist’s intent.

6. Respond/Discuss/Reflect (10-20 minutes)

Opening the conversation for more general discussions, connections, reflections.

All in, the process takes 70-85 minutes, which in our demonstration went by quickly. The power of the process is extraordinary — to welcome everyone into conversation, to validate whatever it is they saw or remembered or felt, to acknowledge and integrate their questions about what they saw and what it meant to others, to delay the

impulse to judge the work without first creating a shared idea of what the work was. The artist was not present (which seemed best to foster an open discussion about our experience). But we were primed to ask the artist more focused and responsive questions than we might have otherwise. In fact, we were *aching* to ask some question of the artist, given the energy and discovery of our conversation.

The protocol is openly available, and easy to attempt. If you're looking for a better structure and strategy for any discussion with your constituents (audiences, boards, staff, colleagues), you should consider this one. It's available, along with many other helpful protocols and tools, on the [Artful Tools resource page](#).

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