

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite...”

William Blake (The marriage of heaven and hell) 1793

DIALOGUES INITIATED BY ART –

A CREATIVE FORM OF DEVELOPING JOINT INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

The article presents and discusses a form of dialogue where the Socratic method is combined with the techniques of looking at art. The extremely stimulating effect of works of art can support the search for solutions. As in the Socratic dialogue the group chooses a question, problem or project of a participant for the conversation process. In addition they then have to opt for a piece of art (i.e. painting, sculpture, photography) that they think corresponds to the chosen question. By examining the object, asking what we actually see, why we see it, and finding our own interpretations, we learn not only to look more precisely at the object, but most importantly to reflect our own assertions. Art, especially contemporary art, provides a variety of material for creative reasoning. Through its complexity within a seemingly abstract form, it opens the mind for exploring innovative ideas and comments. The approach focuses on the ability to develop arguments. It offers the chance to reflect critically upon our own standpoint.

INTRODUCTION

For the 6th International Conference „The challenge of dialogue - Socratic Dialogue and Other Forms of Dialogue in Different Political Systems and Cultures – a global perspective“ we were invited to present a workshop “Dialogues initiated by art – A New Approach for Developing Joint Insights”. Our background is the field of art education. Over the years we developed a new approach of talking about art and arriving at joint conclusions. We wanted to explore our idea of a combination of Socratic dialogue with the techniques of looking at art. The chance to experience our approach with knowledgeable philosophers seemed very appealing. The satisfaction of all participants of our workshop proved that both approaches have very similar traits and that they are very fruitful in combination. In the following we would like to show how the workshop was structured, explain the theoretical basis and how it relates it to human resource management training methods.

COMBINING THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCRATIC DIALOGUE WITH THE STUDY OF A WORK OF ART

The workshop we presented at the conference investigated a new communication method for the exchange of different ideas, opinions and attitudes towards a certain issue, by bringing together the principles of Socratic dialog with the techniques of looking at art. A chosen topic such as „responsibility“, democracy“, “visions”, “team”, “understanding” was juxtaposed with a piece of art, and established a relationship. Hence our working hypothesis is, that

everything the art-object consists of, from colors and shapes to symbols and motives as well as the emotions it provokes, the ideas that come to mind, can enrich our own opinions concerning the chosen topic of the dialogue.

By questioning the object, and asking what one actually sees and what in the work determines that one sees it, we not only learn to look more focused at the object, but most importantly to reflect our own point of view. In the dialogue with the group the participants are able to realize that the actual object - visible in front of everyone's eyes - helps to develop and formulate personal opinions. Every participant can look, describe and discuss. Art offers a wide field for statements to be made. Through its complexity it opens the mind for exploring innovative ideas and comments. A work of art is the trigger for the discussion and a dialogue. This creative communication method supports the critical reflection upon our own values and statements, and helps the group to come up with new insights in a dialogue. Moreover with the object of dialogue in front of every participant's eye it facilitates a joint interpretation. It is the specific form of questioning the structure, form and content of the artwork that helps the participants in the dialogue to re-structure their thinking (Perkins 1994).

LOOKING AT IMAGES AND OBJECTS: APPROACHING THE UNKNOWN – HOW TO LOOK AT ART?

Art History, especially in the European tradition, has developed many aspects and approaches of studying an artwork. Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg are among the pioneers in the field who established a structure of analysis through their studies in iconology (Panofsky, 1955). For our communication method we refer to a less complex system based on Edmund Burke Feldman's model of description, analysis, and interpretation, which comes from the field of art criticism, and was very influential in the American tradition of art education. His model divides the critical act into four phases: description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation. The skills related to all four phases are common for the inquiry processes of both disciplines, art history and art criticism. They most certainly sum up traits of what can be called a general scientific model of inquiry used in most disciplines. For the process of exploration we omitted the last phase in our workshop, since evaluation can be set aside in favor of a general understanding of the artwork. Therefore the fourth phase of the model is not presented in the following.

Phase 1: Description

Assignment: *Please describe what you see by pointing out the single features, objects, and abstract elements such as colors or textures!
Do neither judge nor interpret!*

At first you have to take inventory of all the aspects in a work of art.

The language used while describing should be as “unloaded” as possible and should carry absolutely no judgments (Feldman 1981, 471). This first phase is purely about perception, looking and experiencing. Hereby our own apprehension, personal impression and individual sensation of the object are in focus. We learn to listen to other opinions and statements and get to know the “reality” of other persons (Vygotsky, 1978). This first step offers the possibility of an aesthetic contemplation, by experiencing apperception, different approaches and an expansion of a personal consciousness for the different elements in a work of art. Description is the most challenging of all the 3 steps, since the viewer has to label elements with words and phrases.

Phase 2: Deduction (Formal analysis)

Assignment: *Make a precise statement about what determines your individual perception of the artwork! How is the work structured and why?
Apply a connection of the descriptions to the elements of art such as e.g. repetition, contrast, balance!*

Stimulated by the observation and experience of the artwork, with the second phase starts the formal analysis by questioning the descriptive inventory to discover the relations among the things that were named. It is absolutely necessary to yet defer any form of interpretation; the focus is purely on the elaboration.

Phase 3: Interpretation

Assignment: *Make statements about a possible meaning of the work based upon the descriptions and formal analysis given in the first two steps!*

This last phase is about analyzing the meaning of the work. What does the work of art mean to communicate? What themes does it deal with? What intellectual or artistic problems does it solve? (Perkins 1994) Interpretation relates to all comprehension skills, with an emphasis on inference, deductive reasoning and drawing conclusions.

For the workshop we modified the rigid form of art criticism. We allocated more space and time to the initial emotional response, with the intention to encourage talking. Nevertheless the three steps mentioned above served as a strict guideline that every participant always has to return to throughout the exploration process.

Following the method of Socratic dialogue the dialogue started with a question concerning the personal experience of the work of art, for example:

What effect does it have on you?

What does it do to you?

What do you feel when you look at it?

The response was followed by a precise enquiry:

What in the work, made you come up with your statement? What made you feel that way?

THE CHALLENGE OF DIALOGUE

As in the Socratic dialogue the group chooses a question, problem or project of a participant for the dialogue process. In addition they then have to opt for a piece of art (i.e. painting, sculpture, photography) that they think corresponds well to the chosen question. Correspondence here means a spontaneous feeling towards the artwork in relation to the specific topic. This choice for an artwork has to be made by all group members in mutual consent. To allow for a rewarding choice the workshop should be held in a gallery, a museum or among any sort of art collection, but it is also possible to work with a set of reproductions in reasonable size and good quality. Again, in accordance to Socratic philosophy all the examples have to come from personal experience, since this is the only option to probe the statement and give a deeper understanding and not to speculate. In the course of giving statements and questioning them, the dialogue may take on all sorts of directions, but it is important to continuously return to the initially chosen question/topic and the work of art. It is of the essence to check every statement made against the information given in the object of art.

The following questions were given to the participants as a guideline in individual group discussions:

1. *Try to put your very first impressions into words! The aim of this exercise is to name and identify your emotional response.*
2. *In a second step try to find out exactly what in the picture determines that response!*

3. *Now think about the chosen subject - what aspect in the picture relates best and why?*
4. *If you have formulated your idea, look at the picture again and try to find visual parallels or correspondences that support your assertion.*
5. *Describe then what element in the picture helps you to make your statement!*

It is the task and responsibility of the group and of each participant to relate statements to the piece of art in front of their eyes. This means that the dialogue leads to individual interpretations and ideas, which always have to be brought back to the art object by tracing the visual elements it contains. During the discussion every participant is asked to find the visual proof in the work of art that lead to his/her own opinion.

Everybody is invited to join the following discussion by describing what one can see in the painting in relation to the chosen subject. It is the obligation of everyone to focus on elaborating his or her own statements during the discussion.

6. *Does the painting give me any new ideas on the issue I already know?*
7. *Can I learn from the statements of others brought into the dialogue in relation to the painting?*
8. *What are my emotional responses towards the painting/ subject?*
9. *What can I transfer from the painting into my cognitive argumentation?*

REFLECTION

The workshop in case ended with a reflection on the method and the participant's experiences.

The question whether the method is suitable for trainings in adult education or other learning was discussed. There was a general consensus that it is very suitable for learning environments.

THE ROLE OF ART AS A TRIGGER IN COMMUNICATION

Art of any kind can be employed in this procedure, but we believe that contemporary art is especially appropriate for the purpose, since contemporary art is perceived by many people as difficult and strange. That is exactly the reason why contemporary artworks lend themselves perfectly to be used as subjects of a discourse in which to train one's own openness. Elements that at first glance seem to be incomprehensible or insignificant, force us to step back, to

examine and to describe. For the group and their communicative process artworks serve as a common basis of discussion. Statements brought forward need to be related to what is visible in front of all eyes. Thereby a communicative structure is established that is comprehensible for everyone involved. The immediate exposure to art, to something probably alien, serves as a catalyst but also focal point and offers the chance to develop the openness needed to understand someone else's statements.

CONTEMPORARY ART BROADENS THE HORIZON

It is a challenge to arrest someone's attention with words. It is hard enough to scrutinize assessments, predications and statements in verbal dialogue. That is different with the concentration on an image. (Compare if you will the growing need to use PowerPoint in presentations.) The observer experiences an immediate access. The image is physically present and serves as an anchor of attention. The viewer always has a personal reference to fall back upon, i.e. judgments can be reassessed directly and substantiated by means of description.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD IN ART-ORIENTATED COMMUNICATION

Our communication method „dialogue initiated by art“ uses the Socratic method within the tradition of the Socratic Dialogues by Leonard Nelson and its pedagogical enhancement by Gustav Heckmann (see also Nelson 1996, Heckmann, 1993). The method refers to the 10 principles of dialogue according to Heckmann (1981) and Hartkemeyer/Hartkemeyer (2005). The ten disciplines listed below have to be held up beyond their cultural determinations and limitations. These disciplines ask us:

- (1) To assume the attitude of a learner,
- (2) To have a radical respect for the partner,
- (3) To speak sincerely and be brief,
- (4) To listen to another person carefully,
- (5) To suspend assumptions and judgments,
- (6) To have an inquisitive attitude,
- (7) To plead productively,
- (8) To be open,
- (9) To slow down when speaking,
- (10) To observe the observer.

The Socratic method aims to assure that all participants of a dialogue understand what is said and meant. Consulting a work of art that is visible for everyone supports this ambition. By permanently relocating our statements in the visible structure of the work of art while constantly questioning our personal perception, we experience a “collaborative thinking-experience” in the sense of the Socratic Dialogue. (Raupach-Strey, 2002). Much as in the “classical” Socratic dialogue the aim is to reach a consensus within the group in relation to the initial question. For this the equality of all conversational partners is a precondition as well as the appreciation and consideration of all contributions.

The dialogue is to be understood as a conversation between the participants, who face each other with little knowledge at first. Together they come to a conclusion by asking precise questions. Therefore the piece of art is approached from a neutral point where previous knowledge or information about the work’s content is irrelevant (see also Maieutics, Nelson, 1996).

The process is centered only on subjective perception and personal statements. In contrast to Socratic Dialogue, statements are not to be supported by personal examples but should be tied to the piece of art. For example, a general statement such as „This painting is ugly!“ has to be justified in relation to the concrete painting: „For me the picture is too dark!“ „I do not like the expression of the faces.“ etc. are examples for concretion. Each of these statements has to be comprehensible by the other group members. The moderator’s task is – as it is in traditional Socratic Dialogue –to support the participants to develop their own opinions and interpretations.

The moderator needs to carefully steer the participant’s conversation to enhance their mutual understanding and to keep them focused on the particular question at hand. A main objective is to support the group member’s ability to think clearly and independently to enhance the quality of statements (Nelson, 1975). In addition to traditional Socratic Dialogue the piece of art serves as a medium to ensure an inter-dependence of the different thought strands. The moderator needs to consider the following aspects:

- Sufficiently familiar with this method
- Ready to accept other points of view, especially alternative perceptions of „truth“
- Willing to acknowledge the diverse social, ethnical and morally backgrounds and believes of co-workers
- Self-confident enough to act as a „naive“ questioner
- Able to attribute the dialogue’s success to the group and not to claim it personally.

CONCLUSION / PERSPECTIVE

APPLICATION IN HUMAN RESOURCE TRAINING

Recently art has been used as a stimulus in human resource development trainings as well as in organizational development processes (see Institute Terhalle Gbr 2009; Torsten Blanke, 2002; Franz Josef Löhner, 2004; Felix, Zdenek/Hentschel, Beate/ Luckow, Dirk, 2002). Likewise, and in a modified form, the Socratic method is used within organizational development and development of companies, but there has yet not been a combination of the Socratic Methods and art in this field.

Art is been used in business communication to improve communication between co-workers, create connections between art and the company's products or to create synergy between public relations, internal communication and human resource development (Terhalle). In creative work environments such as advertising agencies art has been employed as a catalyst of brainstorming methods to support the creation of new ideas and solutions. The use of the Socratic method in combination with art in addition creates new affordances for communication processes:

- Improving one's own critical thinking (Nelson 1975, 220)
- Supporting the self-efficacy of participants
- Increasing self-responsibility
- Deepening independent thinking
- Enhancing motivation to work and learn

Key to the success of the method is to know the preconditions and goals of the group in advance as well as to be ready for a „real“ dialogue. Being a „slow“ method, participants have to bring patience and be interested in the other's ideas; otherwise resistance among discussants will be high. The method is fulfilling and valuable only if the moderator is successful in convincing the participants to engage actively in searching for insights and to leave behind them any kind of persistence on their initial point of view.

Socratic dialogue should be used whenever a group of people strives for clarifying terminology or to match and adjust their common goals. Participants need to be able to be aware of their thinking, to describe it and finally to critically reflect it. The selection of an

appropriate piece of art is determined by the group structure and composition, the general topic(s) at hand, and the goal(s) to achieve.

Because of the versatile field of application it is necessary to do concrete planning of the participants roles and tasks. Some groups may be able to moderate themselves in breakout sessions based on given rules and a discussion-plan, others may need moderation all the time. Key to success is a transparent communication and adherence to the principles of Socratic Dialogue.

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