

Introduction

Often in teaching, materials are used to illustrate certain points or convey certain information — or teachers or students are expected to point out pre-determined qualities or features of the material. In teaching through critical exploration, our process is very different. We select the material because of its content, composition, etc., and because of its relationship to topics and themes we hope students will think about — but once it is chosen, the material, in all its complexity, is our focus. Our job is not to show people the topics and themes; it is to discover whatever learners notice about the material. We work to keep learners engaged with the material, and to make sure they refer to it as they articulate their observations and ideas. By cultivating what they notice, we help students enter the topics and themes through their interactions with the material itself. And concentrating on what they notice also helps us learn more about the material and how it can support teaching and learning.

In short, Critical Explorers teachers refrain from explaining or otherwise directing students to the themes we want them to understand. Instead, we ...

- listen closely to what students notice about the material
- work to keep students thinking about the material (even when they may think they have done all they can)
- ask students to say more about their observations — both those we expected and those we didn't expect
- allow students' observations and ideas to help us see the materials as they do
- work to understand changes in their thinking as their ideas continue to develop

For detailed prompts and questions that help support this process, please continue reading through the **Critical Explorers Source Exploration Guide** below.

Critical Explorers Source Exploration Guide

Say that you have a map (or poem, text, image, or other source) to look at together. Express your interest in hearing what they have to say about the map.

Have them look at the first map.

[In your own words...] “Spend some time looking at it closely. Then we’re going to talk about what you notice. By what you notice, I mean something specific you see in the map that you can point out to everyone else.”

After they’ve had time to look at it: “What do you notice? Again, something specific that you can point out to everyone else.”

Encourage them to:

- Listen to each other and, while a student is speaking, try to see what that person is seeing.
- Ask each other to speak up and repeat if they can’t hear, and to clarify if they don’t understand.

In the first round, try to make sure that each person shares.

As often as you like, say the next person’s name in an interested tone.

Make sure everyone hears everything everyone else says. Repeat things for the class yourself a lot, especially if someone speaks quietly.

Invite them to raise their hands if they have something to add to what someone else has said, or if their observation is about the same part of the map someone else just pointed out. Even if the other person said the same thing they wanted to say, encourage them to say it in their own words.

Be enthusiastic about the fact that they’re sharing an observation, or trying to think and explain further, rather than about the content of any particular observations or explanations.

Keep encouraging them to refer back to the map and to use it to support their observations and ideas.

You can do this through your tone and actions and/or through words.

You can go in a circle or call names, using index cards or popsicle sticks or a class list.

This can help reassure them that there’s a clear welcoming space for each person to speak.

Repeating helps you make sure you understand and helps affirm the student who has spoken.

This way, even in the first round, discussions can start to build.

Questions and responses (the sequence is flexible):

What do you notice?

Where in the map do you see that?

Oh, I see that — thank you.

Oh, I see where you mean.

What in the map makes you think that?

Can you say more about that?

Okay, so you notice....

How did you say that again — what were the words you used?

Can someone else explain what you think s/he is saying?

I don't quite understand. Can you say that another way?

Okay, so you're thinking....

Who can add to that observation / idea?

What else do people see that supports that?

What else do you notice?

Who sees this another way?

How does that connect to what X was saying?

After about half the class has shared observations about the first map, say, “We’re not leaving this map, but we’re going to add another to look at at the same time.” Add the second map, and give them another few minutes to look closely. Then invite them to share noticings either of the second map, the first map, or both. Continue as above.

After everyone has shared, invite puzzles in addition to more observations. (“Puzzles” seems to draw deeper thinking and articulation than “questions.”) At this stage, it usually works better to take volunteers, while still encouraging as many different kids as possible to speak.

Encourage the students, again, to listen to each other. Ask kids to say in their own words what another kid has said. Encourage them to ask each other clarifying questions. Invite them to respond to what others are saying and/or to what they said earlier.

Ask questions to find out what they are thinking, how that thinking is changing, and how it relates to the materials and to other people’s thinking. For example, “That seems a little like what X said earlier. What does anyone think about how it might relate to what she said?”

As you choose volunteers, try asking for anyone else who wants to say something on the same topic before moving on to another one, so that discussion can continue to build.

If they try to use their turn to ask a question: “For now, share an observation. There will be time to share questions later.”

They can share their thoughts about what they are pointing out, as long as those thoughts are tied to and supported by their concrete observations.

If they begin to share thoughts related to things they’ve seen outside of class, ask them to look back at the map and find support there for what they want to say. If they can’t, they need to choose a different thing to say.

Allow them to express and develop ideas that sound wrong to you. As long as they are using the map to support and debate them, this is what is eventually going to help them build ideas that sound right!

When kids say they are confused, that is a productive time. Encourage them to explain their confusion and encourage other kids to respond. Try not to frame it as one student answering another student’s question, but as talking through the confusion together. If different ideas are expressed and there is no consensus yet, restate both or all ideas before moving to the next observation.

Try not to...

- Correct or contradict what they are saying
- Change or refine the meaning of anything you repeat
- Seem to judge the worth of contributions as you respond -- for example, by saying “good” after some and not others. Make sure to connect anything like “good” to the act of sharing rather than to your judgment of the quality of what was shared
- Ask questions that lead in a particular direction or that may make kids think you’re waiting for a particular response